

Vietnam 1968

I arrived at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon, a Private First Class (PFC) from the 24th Airmobile Infantry Division in Germany, on January 30, 1968. After my one year of volunteering attempts to fight the Communists, the division sergeant major, with previous combat tours in World War II, Korea, and Southeast Asia, finally allowed my transfer to Vietnam. Why would someone who spoke perfect Russian and German want to leave a safe posting in Munich... he asked me, shaking his head sadly.



U.S. Army Private -- 24th Airmobile Infantry Division, Germany, 1967

The very next day of my arrival, the Communist Tet offensive began with a stunning surprise multiple attack on Saigon launched by the Viet Cong. But I was missing all the action while waiting for a unit assignment. In the confusion, while Saigon burned, the new replacements were left in their barracks, ignored and forgotten. Lying in my bunk, I listened to the explosive gunfire in the city and naively yearned to join the battle. The next day, I strolled through the quiet PX, empty of the usual G.I.s, eyeing the hefty black Rolex Submariner diving watches on sale for \$130. With my new supplement of \$65 per month for combat pay, I would be able to afford such a beautiful watch in just two months' time.



I had volunteered for Vietnam to fight the Communists, but was assigned to a shit detail instead. The sergeant of this workforce picked four newly-arrived troops and issued us each a long pole with an iron rebar, bent almost double at the end - appropriately termed the "shit hook." He then tasked us with pulling out the 55-gallon oil drums that had been cut in half and positioned under the latrines in the camp. Once out in the open, we had to douse the noxious contents of each barrel with diesel fuel from a Jerry can, and then prime them with a little gasoline from another can. The mixture was set afire and allowed to burn for about an hour, depending on how full the barrels were. The sergeant, from a safe distance away, ordered us to stir the burning contents from time to time with our bars until nothing but black cinders remained.

It was the 1st of February. My Birthday. Welcome to Vietnam, Nick.

The thick, choking smoke from the fires enveloped us and stuck to our bodies for days. With hundreds of barrels in the camp, a shortcut seemed in order. So, when our sergeant was looking away, I doused my barrels with straight gasoline instead. The resulting explosion dropped him to the ground, and I was promptly taken off the detail. I wasn't too worried, though.

What were they going to do...? Send me to Vietnam?



This is how we burned shit in Vietnam - with a very long stirring stick!

Finally, I was assigned to the II Corps Tactical Zone's 4th Infantry Division in Pleiku, Central Highlands; but I was still missing all the action of the ongoing Tet battles around me while sitting in Camp Enari on Dragon Mountain, waiting for placement in an infantry unit. Just a few days before, the enemy had struck the Highland cities of Kontum and Pleiku, attempting to penetrate their military compounds; but very quickly, the VC's offensive had suddenly turned into a defensive fight for their lives. Our 4th Division had counter-attacked them hard instead. In the end, the enemy in our area of operations would lose nearly three thousand troops, the South Vietnamese forces approximately one hundred forty-five, and the United States fewer than fifty - all in just one week.

At night, I would sneak out of our "repo-depot" barracks at Camp Enari and make my way to the bunkers on the barbed-wire perimeter to watch the sandbagged Dusters (M-42 Self-Propelled Anti-Aircraft Guns) and M-60 machine-gunners shoot out into the darkness in front. The rhythmic soft thuds of the impacts of the 40mm Duster rounds in the distance had an almost musical repetition to them, while the sporadic, louder blast of an artillery piece, or harsh rattle from a nearby machine gun, shattered the tempo of the malevolent melody. It was a mad cacophony of angry sounds, as if directed by a mad conductor waving his deadly wand somewhere close nearby. Sparks flickered ominously in the dark skies above us, in exact time with the outgoing gunfire. Bright tracers crisscrossed over our heads, falling lazily to the ground like accidental meteors.



I sat on top of the bunker with the other G.I.s, shivering in the cold winter air of the Highlands, awestruck. The totally stoned teenage grunt next to me pointed his M-16 at the bright tracers and flares above and gasped..."Far out!"

He sucked hard on the joint before passing it around. Tet was finally over.

So, this is war... I thought.

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The week that followed was a refresher course in the field how to conduct a search & destroy patrol, identify enemy booby traps, and show us what a Viet Cong guerrilla actually looked like. VC or VICTOR CHARLIE was commonly referred to by the Infantry as "Charlie," and included the North Vietnamese Army regulars.

Some of us, trained for military service in Germany, had never even seen the new 5.56mm M-16s and lighter CAR-15 carbine versions being used in Vietnam. At the firing range, we wondered about the fragility of the weapon's plastic parts, and fumbled with its awkward charging handle and unfamiliar forward bolt assist lever used to seat the cartridge properly in the chamber. This was not the solid, reliable, wooden-stock standard M-14 infantry rifle I was used to shooting. The 14 had a very nasty recoil, but its heavy 175 grain slug flew straight and true, unlike the M-16's unpredictable faster and lighter bullet.

Finally, I received my orders to join the Second Brigade's 2nd Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment as a rifleman; but on the way to check in with the company clerk, I noticed a captain in camouflaged jungle fatigues and dapper Aussie bush hat making a presentation to the troops at a nearby assembly area. He was looking for highly motivated volunteers to join his special unit to conduct dangerous missions in the jungle - the Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol, or LRRPs - guardedly pronounced as "LURPS" by the troops.

After being inserted behind enemy lines, these covert five-man teams would collect battlefield intelligence, scout out the location of enemy troops and base camps, conduct terrain analysis, act as trail watchers, or snatch prisoners to bring back for interrogation. The regular troops, aviation, and artillery of the Second Brigade would then engage and

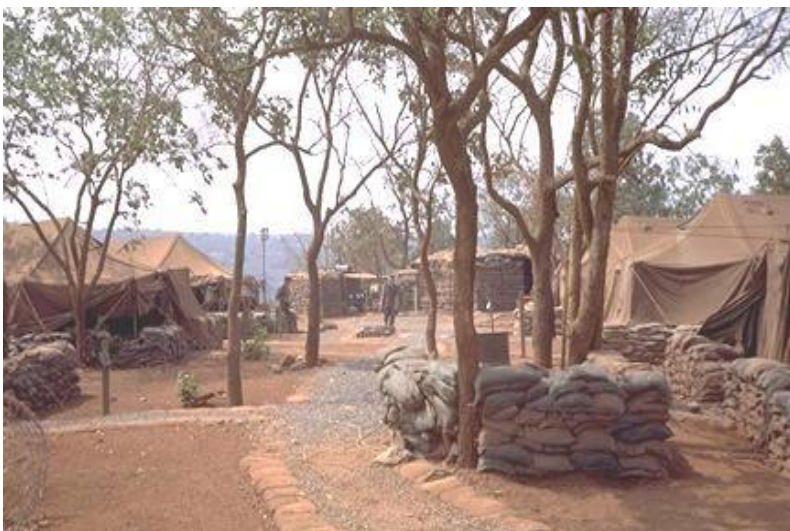
destroy the enemy troops and base camps. The LRRP recce patrols were referred to as “missions” because each one had a specific set of carefully planned-out objectives. Just the kind of job I wanted, especially if it involved finally catching some real Communists.

The interviews and selection process for the LRRPs were rigorous, but my college background, advanced infantry training in Germany, and prior jungle experience in Hawaii helped get me in. One week after my twenty-second birthday, the LRRP’s commanding officer, Cpt. Tom Garnett, and his platoon sergeant Bob Smyers, invited me to join them. However, my acceptance was provisional - whether I stayed would depend on my performance during a few trial missions in the jungle.

The Second Brigade LRRPs, a sixty-man-strong unit, was established at “LZ Oasis” Firebase, twenty-four kilometers west of Pleiku. It acted as the eyes and ears for the Brigade’s three thousand men spread out along the border. Our camp was near the hamlet of Thanh An, on Highway 19, which led thirty-five kilometers into Cambodia. This was an area where the Ho Chi Minh Trail branched out from neutral Cambodia and ended in individual smaller infiltration routes used by the NVA to enter Pleiku Province clandestinely at night.

A U.S. infantry platoon or company stumbling around in the jungle searching for Charlie typically never found him, until it walked into a well-placed ambush. This is why the 4th Infantry Division needed a special entity comprised of stealthy five-man recce teams.

The LRRPs.





On the books, our unit consisted of ten five-man HAWKEYE patrol teams, but with a constant flow of wounded and rotating personnel, we typically fielded no more than six or seven recon teams at a time. Teams "Hotel-2-Alpha," "Hotel-2-Bravo," "Hotel-2-Charlie," "Hotel-2-Delta," "Hotel-2-Echo," "Hotel-2-Foxtrot," "Hotel-2-Hotel"... I noted a sign prominently posted in front of the LRRP compound; a casualty numbers board. It showed a fifty-to-one advantage in enemy kills favoring the LRRPs.

Great... I thought; this job didn't look as dangerous as it sounded. Platoon Sergeant Smyers, who was showing me around, gave me an appraising grin:

"You wanna go out on recon with our small, silent, and experienced teams - or get zapped by a VC booby trap stumblin' around blind in the jungle with the noisy grunts of the 2nd of the 8th? ... Your choice, soldier."

As the incoming "FNG" (Fuckin' New Guy), I was assigned to LRRP team "Hotel-2-Delta," led by Sgt. Terry Johnson, one of the most experienced men in the platoon. He had served a tour with the 1st Air Cav in Korea four years before, and had a previous tour in 'Nam as a helicopter door gunner for the 101st Airborne LRRPs. He was now known for being one of the best team leaders at the Oasis, and next in line to become platoon sergeant when SSG Smyers headed home.



TL "Hotel-2-Delta" Sgt. Johnson

Sgt. Johnson was to take me out on a mission near the trail system to check for any enemy movement, and see if I passed muster during the next five days of patrolling. It was not long after the grueling battles of Dak To and Tet attacks on Pleiku, so the major enemy units had been bloodied and were expected to regroup and withdraw to neutral Cambodia for rest and resupply. Thus, our mission was routine, to confirm their departure.

"Lissen' up private... you' gonna be our RTO... jus' carryin' the radio. Don' do nuthin' else on my patrol! Jus' keep you'self always right by my side, ready with the radio, and look'at what I'm doin'... Don' even think about firin' your weapon. Jus' look at me, but watch what the others are doin' too... Keep your eyes open. Always! Don' do nuthin' else, soldier! Just watch. Do you understand me?" He ordered.

Sgt. Johnson was a big husky trooper, and I was sure that I could easily keep up with him. After months of field exercises in the Bavarian mountains, I was in great shape.

We were going in by helicopter at first light. The team's point man, William Corbitt, a former trapper of alligators in the Everglades swamp - better known as "Shortie" to his close friends, or "Gator" to the others, took me under his wing to explain the mission and what had to be done. He helped me sort out the equipment that he carefully laid out for me on my bunk.

He then took me to the camp kitchen and showed me how to camouflage my face, neck, and arms with greasy soot from our kerosene stove. Gator didn't need no camouflage himself, he told me. He had a special lucky charm to protect him - pointing to a pair of unspent AK-47 cartridges dangling from his neck on a dirty rawhide thong.



Several months before, on his first mission as point man, he was surprised by a VC popping up suddenly in the jungle, just five meters in front. The VC was already firing his AK at Gator, who at the same time, pulled the trigger of his M-79 grenade launcher loaded with a 40mm canister round of buckshot. A deafening blast, and the VC disappeared in a red cloud of blood. Examining the captured AK later, Gator found two unfired rounds still remaining in the weapon. These, then, became his sacred talisman.

Gator didn't look a day over eighteen, but he had already pulled twelve missions in the LRRPs. I listened carefully to what he had to say.

"Our CAR-15 is a very good weapon, but it fires faster than eight hun'erd rounds a minute. The mags they give us for it are real shit, though. They don't hold thirty rounds... not even twenty. If you load 'em up with more than seventeen - the gun can jam! And if you're not careful on the trigger, you can shoot your entire load in just one second," complained Gator.

"Charlie carries AKs that got thirty rounds in their mags. That's twice the firepower we got. And they never jam!" He added emphatically.

Gator opened up the carton boxes holding the cartridges for my CAR and spilled them out on my bunk. Then, he took each empty magazine apart, showing me how to oil and test the spring inside. He examined each cartridge carefully, giving it a light rub with his oily rag, before loading up the magazines. Twenty-one mags in all.

Seventeen rounds in each... and no more - he warned me sternly. Finally, Gator taped a two-piece cleaning rod to the front stock of my fast-firing weapon. This way, if a casing jammed in the receiver, I could knock it out quickly and continue firing.



My handy cleaning rods

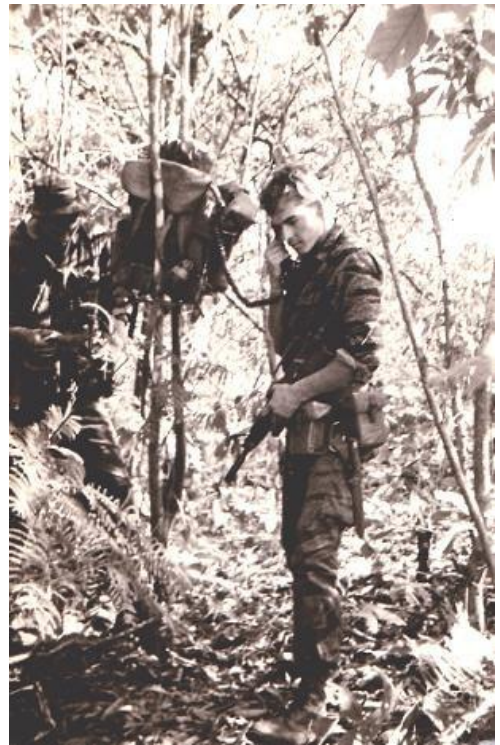
My other equipment consisted of web gear with suspenders hooked up to four old-style M-14 ammo pouches, each holding five 5.56mm CAR magazines (for a total of three hundred forty rounds). Four M26A1 frag grenades were taped to the front ammo pouches, while a couple of CS grenades (tear gas) and Willie Petes (white phosphorus canisters) hooked on the back pouches. I also strapped on my personal Gerber Mark II combat knife, and a compact .380 Cal. Llama automatic pistol that I had brought along with me from Germany against all Army authorization.

Also on my bunk was a "PRICK 25" (Model AN/PRC-25) radio set that, not surprisingly... weighed exactly twenty-five pounds, along with two large spare battery packs, each one resembling a carton of cigarettes, but full of lead instead. There was a one-meter-long flex steel tape whip antenna that would be connected to the radio during patrol movement, one three-meter-long fiberglass "fishing pole" antenna that collapsed into six sections for communicating from a fixed position, and a roll of commo wire for setting up a long-range T-antenna. In addition, I was given a spare handset, an SOI (Signal Operating Instructions) with radio frequencies for contacting artillery support units in the AO (area of

operation), and a tiny URC-10 survival back-up radio for signaling our aircraft in an emergency.



The heavy Prick



Other gear included a Claymore antipersonnel mine, several smoke grenades for signaling, a few compact M67 baseball frag grenades, a packet of C-4 plastic explosives with det cord and blasting caps, ground trip flare, and a parachute signaling flare. I also slipped three cans of peaches and a tiny, handy, folding army P-38 can opener into my pack. Peaches were my favorite military rations; I would trade cigarettes for them with the smokers in my unit.

Finally, my teammates dumped some additional items on my cot, including a section of Goldline climbing rope, five canteens of water, a dozen dehydrated LRRP rations, rubber poncho and nylon poncho liner, spare socks, small towel, first aid kit, can of serum albumin blood expanding plasma, iodine water purification tablets, salt tablets, malaria pills, adrenaline boosting pills, morphine pain-killing syrettes, an orange ground signal panel and pen gun flare kit, strobe light, flashlight, DEET bug juice, map, notebook, pens, signaling mirror, watch, and two compasses (one of which was for wearing on my wrist)...

My new teammates helped me stow all these items in specific pre-designated locations into a modified Vietnamese Army rucksack, and then had me jump up and down with the pack on to check for noise. Sgt. Johnson tossed me a large roll of sticky green cloth tape to secure any loose items. Not including my weapon and combat kit, my rucksack easily weighed sixty pounds. Now I understood why the infantrymen in Vietnam were known as the “grunts” – that was the noise they made when lifting their heavy packs from the ground!

I was carrying a total load of over eighty pounds of weapons and supplies to last a week in the jungle, while my own body weight was one hundred sixty-five. My teammate Gator weighed one hundred thirty pounds - and his pack was as heavy as mine!

At least I didn't have to wear a steel pot anymore, having exchanged my heavy infantry helmet for a soft floppy hat, and a set of extra-large South Vietnamese Army tigerstripe camouflage fatigues.





Teammate Noble, weighed down and smiling... but not for long

We were off just before dawn, five men with blackened faces, loaded down with weapons and gear. On the helicopter pad, we carefully cross-checked our equipment and weapons over and over again, and then climbed on the smoke-belching dark green bird that seemed to be whining with impatience to leave the ground – with or without us. Soon, we were whirling past the little yellow and brown agricultural squares far below us, clicking along rapidly one by one, to the foothills, and the dense green expanse of the jungle near the border. After making several false insertion maneuvers to confuse any enemy observation, the "slick" (helicopter) prepared to drop us off at a small previously selected clearing in the jungle, while two Cobra helicopter gunships crisscrossed low around us to provide fire support.

We had previously checked and chambered our weapons; they were ready to fire. I had a hundred questions to ask Sgt. Johnson. My first combat mission...

What do I do once reaching the ground? When do I set up the radio? What if the enemy was already waiting for us there? What if they start shooting? What if my new, unfamiliar CAR-15 jammed? What do I do then?...

Signaling me to follow from my canvas seat by the bulkhead, the men moved over to the belly of the aircraft, next to the open hatches, sitting on the metal deck with their feet

hanging over the sides, ready to jump off. The noise of the rotor and gusts of wind made speech impossible, and anyways, I could no longer remember what I had wanted to ask the team leader. It seemed so important at the time...

Heart pounding from the adrenaline rush, I looked at the rapidly approaching ground covered by high elephant grass swirling around in a mad green dance just a few meters below us. The chopper hovered in place momentarily and I mechanically followed my teammates, who leapt off the skids in a determined rush, weapons extended out front, swallowed by the dark green sea of vegetation that was moving around us in an angry and menacing sway.

I did not realize for how long I dropped through the tall grass, two meters at least, but the heavy load on my back dumped me unceremoniously upside down on the ground with an unexpectedly hard jolt. The metal stock of my CAR was jabbing painfully into my ribs. I was stunned, unable to move. Did I break something?

I could feel Sgt. Johnson's impatient hands shaking me roughly around to get my pack open and quickly reach the radio. He had to contact the helicopters and confirm our exact drop location on the map before clearing them to depart the area.

We then moved slowly away from the LZ (landing zone) and set up a defensive position for an hour-long motionless wait to see if our insertion was clean, and get used to the jungle around us. After the numbing noise of the chopper ride, the jungle surrounding us was deathly quiet.

Finally, we started out, moving very slowly, one step at a time, with the point man in front, then Sgt. Johnson about ten meters back, me with the radio sandwiched directly behind him in the middle of the patrol, then the ATL (assistant team leader), and rear security spaced out last. As we moved slowly through the heavy brush, making no noise whatsoever and avoiding all trails, I started to feel the weight of my pack as well as my brand-new stiff leather and canvas jungle boots that were quickly chafing my feet into a mass of blisters.

Sgt. Johnson was teaching me how to walk - on hard ground, "toe to heel;" on soft ground, step out "flat-footed" - he preached patiently. Treading silently was a skill that took some time to acquire, I found out.

I was not used to the terrain either, and had to keep my eyes constantly on the ground to keep from tripping over the vegetation. Soon, I was huffing and puffing, barely keeping up with Sgt. Johnson, just a meter in front, whose bulky frame moved along with an ease and agility I envied.

I watched Gator the point man performing his graceful dance in front of us, gliding smoothly and silently from one shadow to the next, instinctively looking for the best cover and concealment. Having grown up in the Everglades, Gator was totally at home here in the Vietnam jungle. They told me back in camp that he was a born poker player - superstitious, alert, cool under pressure, a natural observer, calculating - always fixing his odds and advantages. Scrutinizing Gator's meticulous moves, I thought that gamblers did make good point men. Both were running on total confidence and pure luck.

By late afternoon, we had discovered a series of fresh trails, which we skirted in parallel for security's sake, since this area had no civilian population. We heard the sound of wood being chopped in the distance and smelled smoke from camp fires.

These two unmistakable indicators of close enemy presence would haunt me for the next year, each time evoking the same immediate reaction of anticipation, caution, and lingering dread.

The team was quickly becoming very anxious. The point man stopped and whispered calmly to Johnson that he saw the flash of green uniforms and pith helmets ahead: a squad of NVA passing silently right in front of us! My eyes, constantly fixed on the ground before me, saw nothing at all. More trails intersected our path, well used, and described by Johnson as "high speed" during our next radio contact with the Oasis. We were walking into an NVA base camp that was clearly in use. It was time to pull back and observe.

The team was getting more and more on edge as we tried to move quietly away from the NVA base to find a high point from which Sgt. Johnson could call in an artillery or air strike on the enemy position. But it was getting dark, and the terrain forced us to descend away from the NVA instead of gaining cover above them. The team leader wisely decided that it would be safer to find a secure night location and engage the enemy in the daytime. We crawled on our hands and knees with heavy packs on our backs into the thick jungle; Gator, the point man, using a small pair of garden shears to silently shape a narrow tunnel in the dense foliage for us. The last LRRP, on rear security, crawling backwards, carefully covered up our tracks behind him.

We were well concealed in a thicket, but not very far from the NVA trails above us. We set up Claymore mines around the perimeter for security, and the team formed a tight circle with the radio placed in the middle. Sgt. Johnson stretched out his bulky frame next to me, where he could check up on me easily in the dark. We ate our rations cold, reluctant to use our little heating tablet stoves. The tablets burned with a distinctive acrid chemical odor that could compromise us.

I replaced the radio's short metal whip antenna with the three-meter-long rigid fishing pole that clicked together like tent poles, and Sgt. Johnson whispered the coordinates of our night position to the Oasis. He also arranged a possible extraction for the next day by reconfirming the location of a pre-planned LZ that was about five hundred meters below our bivouac. After the sitrep radio call, Johnson rehearsed with all of us the exact compass bearing of our escape route to the LZ, in case an emergency developed during the night, and a final rally point if any of the team members became separated in the dark. The entire team worried that the NVA was already on our track, while I had not a clue that we were even in any danger. My feet were killing me and I removed my boots to survey the damage.

My teammates grinned at my futile efforts to inspect and gingerly poke those blisters around. No, the pain didn't go away.

I was exhausted. Soon, it was pitch black, but everyone around me was awake and jumpy.

What the hell is everyone so worried about?... I thought to myself puzzled. Could the enemy really have spotted us earlier somehow...

An hour later, when I was just starting to doze off, I felt Gator's hand suddenly brush up against my right arm, clasping my wrist in a soft but urgent grasp. It was our danger signal in the dark! Confused, I mechanically groped for Sgt. Johnson's arm on the other side of me with my left hand. This way the circle was complete - the entire team instantly knew that everyone was fully aware of a menace facing us in the dark.

I sat up instantly alert, heart pounding, trying to gather my senses. A line of flashlights blinked dimly several hundred meters away on the ridge above us, creeping slowly and steadily down towards us. The NVA were looking for us!

My teammates were packed and preparing to go in an instant, rolling up their ponchos on the ground, quickly recovering Claymores hidden behind the trees in front; weapons ready in their hands. Sgt. Johnson was on the radio, urgently whispering a request for our immediate night extraction from the LZ below us. Choppers from the Oasis would be on station in twenty minutes and we had to get to the LZ in the dark by compass bearing alone. The team was already moving out.

I was still packing up the radio and getting my boots laced. First, I had to remove the long rigid fishing pole antenna from the radio, fold it up, and replace it with the short flexible metal whip.

I was nervous. I couldn't see a thing in the dark, and my hand was shaking as I fumbled around, feeling for the terminal connection. Johnson was tugging impatiently on the handset swearing at me to get my ass in gear. I was trying to find the tiny hole in the dark and screw in the whip, but was already being brusquely propelled forward by the LRRP behind me through the dense underbrush - pack wide open and in my arms. I was juggling both antennas loosely in my hands, while my slinged weapon was dragging from my shoulder. My bootlaces were still untied...

No one worried about maintaining noise discipline anymore; we had to find that LZ quickly. In the confusion in the dark, I accidentally dropped the thin, slippery metal whip

antenna to the ground, and while pushing through the vegetation, the six-section fishing pole antenna in my other hand unexpectedly opened up and locked with a distinct:

Click... Click... Click...

It became stuck in a bush, and I dropped it as well, still desperately hanging on to my pack and weapon, while trying to keep my hold on the rucksack of Sgt. Johnson who was crashing heavily through the brush in front of me. We were all connected together in single file, with Gator on point, compass in hand, and flashing his feeble red light intermittently into the dark jungle in front.

Incredibly, we all stumbled into the LZ in the dark, faces and arms torn up by the vegetation. We could already hear the incoming choppers thudding steadily towards us.

Johnson was talking excitedly into the handset to guide in the helicopters that were looking for us.

Nothing.

He noticed the radio in my open pack... no antenna! He shouted at me to screw it in. I gave him a weary grin and pointed to the jungle behind him. Johnson was furious. He grabbed my wrist, spat on the antenna terminal, and pressed my thumb down hard to make contact with it. My body briefly became the antenna - and the handset stuttered... the pilot came on the air asking for directions. Johnson told him to look for our strobe light that would mark the landing.

Johnson impatiently ripped the hat off my head, took out his strobe, turned it on, and placed it inside. He shoved the hat into my hands and then pushed me forcefully out into the center of the clearing. I stood there in the open like the Statue of Liberty, hand stretched out to the sky, with the strobe blinking rapidly, while the helicopters quickly homed in on our brilliantly flashing white light.

The first bird dropped down quickly towards us. The pilot turned on his floodlights that illuminated us like the sun. The blast from the rotor was deafening and kicking up dust in our faces; we were blinded by the spotlights, when suddenly one of the door gunners

opened up with his M-60 machine gun, the long, orange muzzle flash reaching down towards us. Was he shooting at us?

The team scrambled madly onto the chopper while I stood, dazed and confused by the gunfire, still holding the flashing strobe tightly in my hat. Sgt. Johnson, an angry look on his face, tossed my pack with the radio on the slick, and pushed me up the skid after it. He jumped on quickly behind me, last man on board, and gave the pilot the O.K. to lift off.

As we rose, I saw green tracers arcing casually towards us, and muzzle flashes sparkling on the ridge. Both door gunners were firing frantically towards them, and so were some of the LRRPs with their CAR-15s. Exhilarated, I fired my CAR into the darkness below along with my teammates. It was a miracle that with all the confusion and firing not one of us had been hurt.

I was really going to like the LRRPs!

Sgt. Johnson, a concerned look on his face, pulled the weapon out of my hands.

"What d'a tell ya before? Jus' stay close t'me and watch... don' do nuthin' else!! Remember?" He hissed at me.

The next morning, I found my old steel pot on the bunk and was told to turn in my CAR-15 and other gear. It looked like Sgt. Johnson had made his report about my performance on patrol and I was being sent back to Camp Enari in Pleiku to rejoin my old infantry unit. Miserable, I contemplated the future.

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Rejected by the LRRPs after my first trial mission with Sgt. Johnson, I was waiting for the supply truck to take me away. Another team leader, Sgt. Lyn Valeen, a tall, well-built Californian, in his twenties, with unruly black hair and an angular, inquisitive face, unexpectedly entered the tent looking for a volunteer to join his team, "Hotel-2-Charlie," on a patrol to replace a member who had been wounded. I jumped at this chance and did everything I could to persuade him to take me along. Valeen was skeptical, but came back

later when he could not find another body. He had talked to the CO and received permission for my second trial mission.

Cpt. Garnett had given me another chance.



LRRP CO Cpt. Garnett

Valeen took me to the special compound at the Oasis holding Viet Cong prisoners from the Second Brigade's recent battles of the Tet Offensive in Pleiku. Dozens of them were squatting on the ground, small, muscular, dark-haired, hard-looking sullen men, cardboard tags around their necks, hands tied up, clothes ripped and stained with sweat and blood; a mix of tribal loincloths, black PJs, and khakis. Soon they would be turned over to the South Vietnamese for interrogation. They looked at us defiantly in fear and hatred. Valeen told me to examine them closely - this is what we would be looking for tomorrow in the jungle.

Finally, I was face to face with the Communist enemy.



I carried the PRICK radio again on my next patrol. This time, however, no complaints about the heavy pack and blisters, and I paid full attention to my surroundings. I redeemed myself by finding the team's location on the map using the topographic map surveying skills previously learned in my geology class at college. We had been inadvertently inserted at the wrong LZ, perhaps a kilometer away from our intended target drop, and the terrain was not matching our maps. Our planned route was not leading us to the objective. The high vegetation obscured any possibility of obtaining compass bearings to known terrain features. We were lost...

Not a good thing if we ran into trouble and needed to fix our exact location quickly for artillery fire support, or to find our way to the extraction LZs programmed along the way. We wasted a full day looking for the right course, and in the end, I confirmed our correct position on the map. After the mission, Sgt. Valeen offered me a permanent slot on his team "Hotel-2-Charlie."

I was back in the LRRPs!



Gator

TL "Hotel-2-Charlie" Sgt. Valeen

(Photo:T. Garnett)

Shaner



But first, I needed the evaluation and endorsement of another team leader to qualify me as a LRRP trainee on probation during the next month at the Oasis. SP/5 Joe Steimbach, a quiet, wiry, intense Southerner, was in his early twenties, but was known as the “old man” in the platoon. This was because of his experience in the jungle and judgment skills as a patrol leader. During the past year, he had not lost a single man, dead or wounded, on his teams. Steimbach was to show me the special patrolling techniques of his recce team “Hotel-2-Alpha.”



TL "Hotel-2-Alpha" SP/5 Steimbach (with cigarette)

The mission with Steimbach was routine: check out an abandoned VC staging area that the LRRPs had mapped before, look for any new activity, and acquaint me with how the enemy operated in the field. We found the old camp hidden in the jungle, deserted as before - a collection of shaky hootches with remnants of grass roofs, bamboo storage platforms set up from the ground, and a few earthen bunkers already starting to collapse from lack of use. Not much more. The rain had washed open several narrow entrances to tunnels and spider holes excavated into the hillside. Normally, if well concealed, we would have walked right by them.



Steimbach, twisting his shoulders, squeezed into the widest cave opening, but his chest became stuck. As none of my other teammates were eager to search the holes, I quickly volunteered to venture inside: flashlight in one hand and my little .380 pistol in the other. I had to show my new teammates what I could do.



I heard Steimbach yelling after me:

"Don't you touch nothin' inside... nothin'... do you read me soldier?"

The opening was very tight, not much different from crawls in the Hawaiian lava tubes I was used to exploring just over a year back, and ended abruptly after only ten meters. It was a weapons cache. At the end of the narrow passage, pointing directly at me, I could see the shiny barrels of a bundle of Chinese SKS rifles, balanced on tripods cut from bamboo to keep them off the damp ground. Trophies!

Forgetting all about Steimbach's last instructions, I inched forward in excitement, grabbed the barrels, and pulled them carefully towards me. There was a soft snap, but nothing happened. Thrilled, I crawled backwards out of the hole, dragging the enemy weapons behind me, eager to show off my find to my teammates.

Outside, Steimbach, furious, was yelling at me again... this time pointing to the scraps of rotten vine attached to the triggers of the loaded weapons, the source of the

snapping sound. If the VC had owned some real nylon shoelaces instead of having to use vines, I would still be lying in that narrow tunnel with a few bullet holes in my chest. Only a tiny Montagnard tribesman could have slipped carefully along the wall to disarm such a trap. We tossed all our tear gas grenades into the remaining tunnels. The fine CS powder would stick to the dirt passages for months. Anyone crawling around would stir it all up again and hopefully choke himself senseless.



Steimbach pulling SKSs from cave

* * *

The next month at the Oasis was defined by accelerated learning to work closely with my four teammates. They told me that if I actually survived the first month in the field as a trainee, I had a good chance of finishing my entire Vietnam tour in the LRRPs. Maybe they were kidding me, but no one was smiling.

My teacher on patrols became Ebon Chue, a Jarai tribe Montagnard who was a former Viet Cong, but had joined the LRRPs through the CIA's Chiêu Hồi "Open Arms" defector program. The year before, the Communists had executed Chue's father over a dispute with a VC tax collector in his village on the Cambodian border while Chue was away fighting the Americans. Chue had changed sides now and was looking for revenge.

Chue hated the South Vietnamese as much as he did the Communists, as they called him “moi” - a savage - who couldn’t read or write, or even speak their language. But in the LRRPs, Chue became our little American brother, accepted as an equal, just like any one of us, treated with total respect, trust, and affection. I soon became his real friend after a few shared meals of his tribe’s favorite dish – barbecued rats, chased down with some aged fermented, bubbly, sour, evil-tasting Montagnard rice wine.



Former VC comrade *Ebon Chue*, my teacher on how to survive on point



Cooking rats in the bush with *Chue*

Chue had a shock of curly black hair and wore a perpetual mad grin on his face. He acted more like an excited teenager than the expert tracker that he was. He weighed less than a hundred pounds and could move through the jungle as silently as a predator tiger stalking its prey. Sometimes, Chue ranged alone far in front of the patrol to bring the rest of the team closer to the target. His intimacy with the local language helped us sort out detainees and prisoners to obtain real-time intelligence about the enemy.



Sampling *Montagnard* fermented rice wine with Valeen and scout *Chue* on the Cambodian border

Chue taught me the skills needed to survive on point in the jungle - to travel in total silence, using the shadows of the terrain and vegetation constantly to camouflage my movements. He taught me never to take my eyes away from what was directly in front of me, not even for a second; to listen to every sound, and be ready to react instantly to a threat. Chue also showed me how to detect booby traps that the VC positioned on the LZ sites and trails we encountered in the jungle.

Charlie had many surprises waiting for us: Punji stakes made from long bamboo slivers with fire-hardened points were concealed in the tall grass and penetrated our new jungle boots despite their protective metal inner soles. The human excrement or poison that was smeared on the tips caused rapid infection and a cumbersome casualty for the team to evacuate to the helicopter. Tripwires hooked to booby-trapped unexploded U.S. artillery rounds took a toll on our infantry soldiers as they searched for the enemy in the jungle. This was why our LRRP teams avoided walking directly on the trails, and instead, always moved parallel to them.

Charlie dug out spider holes, narrow cylindrical pits just large enough to hold one man, in strategic ambush positions to target our troops walking on the trails. They were perfectly concealed in the ground, covered by camouflaged lids. Charlie would watch the approach of the U.S. soldiers from inside the hole with his grass cap just inches off the ground. He would shoot and then disappear quickly under cover, invisible. His narrow vertical hole also offered good protection from our artillery and mortar rounds.



* * *

Another primary objective of the LRRPs was to capture enemy prisoners for interrogation. Sgt. Valeen, my new team leader, was an expert at prisoner snatches. We often hid near villages to try catching VC tax collectors, NVA couriers, or political propaganda officers. Toward evening, just before curfew time, people started to return to the village from the fields where they worked. Most were farmers and civilians, but with luck, we might occasionally catch uniformed soldiers or political officers on their way to get a hot meal in the village.

Sometimes we waited for them hidden outside the village, and sometimes the five of us just entered the village directly to catch the enemy inside by surprise.



Prisoner snatches were never easy because no one could really plan for or predict their outcome. Each one was different, and many had to be aborted simply because the enemy often moved in groups, and so the target was not alone. One technique, however, seemed to work well. For example, one day, after finding the ideal spot for an ambush on a trail just outside an enemy-controlled village, Valeen separated our team into two groups. Gator and RTO Smitty were sent to a spot facing away from the village, while Thompson and I hid ourselves behind the nearby bushes that offered concealment and a good view of the approach to the village. This way, the team could monitor the traffic on the trail from both directions, and cover the snatch from either side. Valeen placed himself at a bend in the trail, in the middle of the two groups, within visual distance for hand signals to both. The main signals were to confirm the approach of an enemy target, to let the enemy pass, or to block him.

Soon, Valeen gave me a thumb up which meant that a target was approaching me from his side, and we had to block quickly. I nodded to Thompson, and we both leapt out of the tall grass when an NVA soldier suddenly appeared around the bend. He wore khakis, soft hat, and rubber-tire sandals, carried a small olive green pack with a soot-smudged cooking pot strapped to the outside, and dangled his SKS carbine casually from a shoulder sling. He froze in shock, mouth wide open in fear and surprise, upon seeing our blackened mugs directly in front of him.

I stuck my CAR-15 into his terrified face, yelling... "Dừng Lại!"... Stop!

Thompson jammed the barrel of his weapon hard into the middle of his chest. The NVA soldier inhaled sharply in a wheezing gasp, and doubled over. Valeen was already behind him, smashing the butt of his heavy M-14 sniper rifle into his legs.

The NVA collapsed into a heap without making a sound. We removed his weapon and pack, sealed up his mouth with cloth tape, and quickly dragged him away from the trail. I tied him up into a neat bundle with my long nylon climbing rope, until he was trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey. This way, two LRRPs could drag him along together through the jungle by the thick ropes to our nearby LZ for liftoff. Good thing that our captive did not weigh much more than my heavy rucksack.



This was how I bagged my first real Communist, complete with a poster of Ho Chi Minh and a packet of Marxist-Leninist propaganda booklets that he was about to use in his political study session with the inhabitants of the village.

However, it was getting dark, and no helicopters were available for our extraction. We were instructed to spend the night in the jungle with our captive, and walk out to the nearest LZ in the morning for pick-up. After dragging him bound for another hour through the thick vegetation, we set up for the night. Conducting a thorough search of his belongings, we examined all his documents and personal items. In his belt pouch, I found a set of black and white miniature photo portraits of his wife and two children. I put them away in my pack and tied him up tighter again. This was a standard pre-interrogation procedure: separate from our prisoner anything that he could use to maintain his strength, morale, and inner comfort.

I scrutinized my first prize attentively - the enemy soldier who was looking down dejectedly at the ground in front of him - as well as the Uncle Ho poster we had found in his pack. The Communist teacher and his loyal disciple, just next to me!

Hours later in the dark, I looked at him again, surreptitiously, through my infrared night scope. His jaw was moving up and down rhythmically in a nervous spasm. His eyes were wide open and he looked terrified.

The next day, the choppers picked us up and we dropped off our prisoner directly at the Special Forces and South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) interrogation center. Stumbling away from the helicopter with two LRRPs tugging impatiently on his bonds, he had the same terrified expression on his face. I picked up the sandal that he had lost while being dragged away and stuck it under his belt. Instinctively, I knew that he would soon be facing very hard times.

He may have been the enemy and a Communist, but I should have given his family photos back, I thought to myself with regret afterwards when looking at the pictures again.

Each prisoner snatch was a high-risk operation for the LRRPs, as it often developed into a desperate struggle of survival for the target - and typically ended in a firefight. We

tried various tactics to ensure success; including bringing along a silenced M-16 rifle, but the failure rate remained high. Each attempt at a capture presented an excellent chance of being shot yourself!



Going underground to capture prisoners



During a one-year period, the Second Brigade LRRPs managed to bring back alive just one senior NVA officer as prisoner. Fortunately, we had better luck with the tiny enemy Montagnard tribesmen, and the lighter-armed Viet Cong guerrillas.

Thompson

Smitty

Poz

Team "Hotel-2-Charlie"



NVA officer prisoner

Gator

"Uncle Ho"

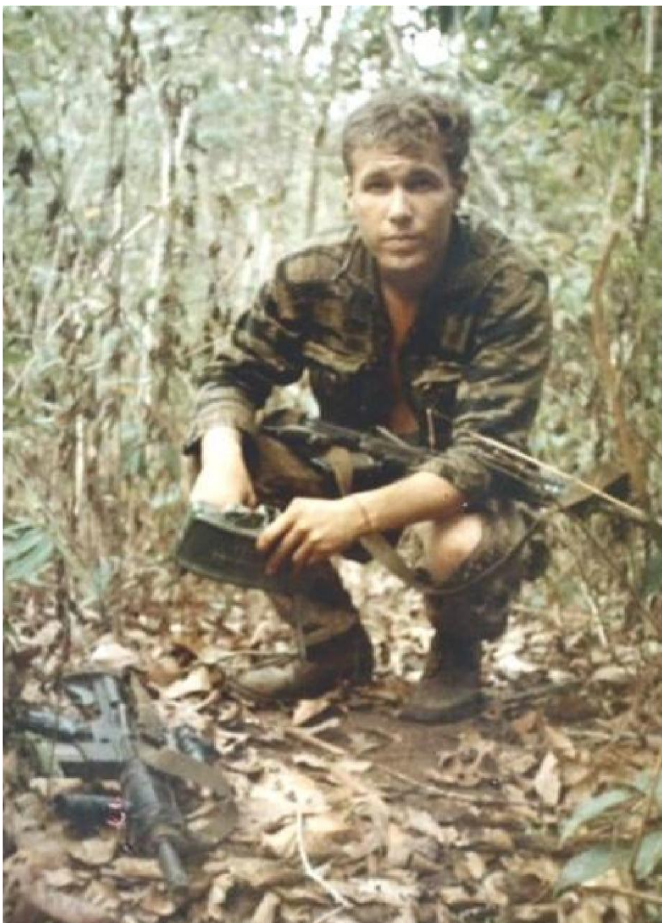
Valeen



A secondary assignment for the LRRPs, called a HUNTER-KILLER mission, was to set up evening ambushes on major trails in the jungle to induce fear and stress amongst the enemy. We attacked Charlie by surprise when he was casually strolling down his trails, returning to his village or base camp. The objective was to instill doubt in his mind that he was safe in his own jungle sanctuary.

On one occasion, my teammate Thompson had set up a Claymore mine at the bend of a “high speed” foot trail, the kind of major artery used by NVA troops coming down the Ho Chi Minh way from Cambodia. The M18A1 Claymore was a terrible weapon. Set on two pairs of wire legs, it fired seven hundred steel balls out to fifty meters into the kill zone like a huge shotgun, and could be aimed vertically up and down using a sight. Thompson had placed his mine practically on the trail itself, concealed under some leaves, and aimed very low.

He was waiting for a target and the right moment to squeeze his “clacker” to detonate the mine.



Two NVA soldiers with heavy packs and weapons on their shoulders were casually marching in single file and talking softly to each other, unaware of the team's presence in an L-shaped ambush wrapped tightly around the trail.

As the two men approached the trap, Thompson fired the Claymore and a cloud of dust obscured the trail for a moment. The two NVA were flat on their backs, heavy packs holding them down to the ground, while the stumps of what used to be their legs were squirming helplessly in the air, spurting steady streams of blood. Four red fountains, straight up... The blast had taken the legs closely off at the hips, but both men were still alive! One was trying to untangle his weapon, in shock; confused, not understanding why he could not sit or stand up.

Later, Thompson told me that from that day, each time he picked up a Claymore in his hands, he remembered the two legless soldiers on that trail, facing the sky, and dying slowly in their glistening blood that was drying fast in the sun.

LRRP Team "Hotel-2-Charlie"



Gator wearing his lucky charm and no camo

Poz

Thompson

RTO Smitty

TL Sgt. Valeen

Given my ability with land navigation, I was soon selected to be the point man of the team. This was my favorite job, as it combined all the functions of the mission. The patrol had a designated marching route and compass bearing. But it was the point who chose the actual path based on terrain, security, concealment, and his ability to observe. Everyone followed the point, with our RTO in the middle position carrying the radio, counting out the steps that were converted into meters to keep track of the distances on the map. The point was also likely to spot the objective or the enemy first, and fire the first shots.

Walking point, moving slowly forward one careful step at a time, my senses worked in unison and at full capacity. My eyes focused constantly on what was in front, while also scanning left and right, up and down - marking the slightest movement or abnormal shape or color. My ears attuned to every sound - or lack of sound - in the jungle, picking out the unusual and fixing its location. My nose was constantly sniffing for burning fires or human presence. It was amazing how my senses sharpened after only a few days alone in the jungle. We could easily smell the combination of heavy sweat and cooking fire soot on an NVA soldier fifty meters away. NVA prisoners told us that they could likewise often identify us in the jungle by the perfumed soap and shaving lotion that we used back in base camp.

My eyes would simultaneously scan down for booby traps and forward along the barrel of my CAR-15 that I held ready with my right hand, on a parachute cord shoulder sling, so that my left hand was free and could move any vegetation that was in the way. Finger lightly wrapped around the trigger, and right thumb always on the selector switch that I could rotate instantly forward to fire at an enemy target. Because of the dense vegetation and clinging vines, it was risky to keep the safety off, but I always had to be ready to fire on point, since surprise enemy contacts could often be less than ten meters away.

Mainly, I trained myself to react instantly with controlled firing of three-round bursts with my CAR, starting low at the target's feet and moving quickly up to body center. Bullets hitting the ground could still deflect to hit the target, and there was a visual point of reference to adjust the placement of the next group. Our seventeen-round magazines lasted just over one second on full automatic, so we could not afford to miss. I tried to apply Steimbach's creed: your weapon is an extension of your body, an integral part of it; fire only

at a target that you know you could hit. Relax, shoot deep from inside you - the bullet must come out with your maximum energy, focus, and commitment. It must fly straight and true.

Often, I would wear a captured soft, green Chinese People's Liberation Army bush hat on point, as well as carry an NVA rucksack, hoping to confuse the enemy if he spotted me by surprise in the jungle - giving me that extra second to fire my CAR first. The enemy's AK selector switch was on the right side of the weapon, far away from the trigger, a huge disadvantage for the shooter who kept the safety on. Either his finger was on the trigger, or on the switch - but not on both. I quickly found out that by the time Charlie figured out who was under that Chinese hat, and finished fumbling with his awkward selector switch, I had already released my thumb safety and fired a burst at him first.



CAR



AK

Later, I learned how to hit targets just meters in front of me without even aiming. For practice, our Special Forces instructors hung painted C-ration tin cans in the bush and yelled out the colors for us to shoot at. Red... Blue... Green... Yellow... We would instantly point our CARs and fire hundreds of times, until our muzzles, trigger fingers, arms, and eyes were all perfectly synchronized together.

I also had my Willie Pete phosphorus grenade handy in case I had to break contact quickly with the enemy and pull back. This nasty weapon had a burst radius of seventeen meters, and flamed for one minute at a temperature of 5,000 degrees F., causing horrific burns, and an immediate blanket of white smoke to temporarily delay an enemy advance.

Weighing in at over two pounds, Willie Pete had to be thrown with considerable force, however, to ensure that you didn't get fried yourself when the grenade detonated!

Each LRRP team typically also carried two M-72 Light Anti-Tank Weapons (LAW)s on its missions. Charlie didn't own any tanks, but our compact five-pound rockets could quickly blow an enemy bunker or firing position into pieces.

The fundamental quality of point, however, was the ability to trust all his physical senses to make instantaneous decisions about his team. He needed a profound grasp of all his combined observations in real-time, and a personal instinct about making fast and correct follow-up decisions. Did his "feeling" tell him to turn quickly to the right instead of left - where there was an enemy ambush? Did he arrive at the objective, or miss it by a few hundred meters? Could he find the nearest extraction LZ quickly?

Walking point, I could not afford to make the slightest mistake. I could not fail my team.

Through patience, stealth, and concealment we were often able to outfox the native Montagnard tribesmen in their own jungle backyard. But, it was mainly surprise... speed... and shock... that made it possible for us to overcome the enemy during the violent confrontations, and to survive ourselves.

** * **

One major problem facing our forces after the Tet Offensive was the new enemy sanctuaries being established just across the fluid borders with neutral Laos and Cambodia. At the same time, Charlie built new base camps close by the border inside Vietnam, spread widely apart to escape our artillery and bombing strikes, all connected by a network of well-concealed foot trails. A company of enemy soldiers might be spread out over a square kilometer of jungle.

Much of the time, Charlie was resting and hiding in the neutral zones, safe from our aircraft, and moved to his forward base camps and staging areas only when a major offensive was planned against the ARVN and American forces. Then, platoon and company-sized formations of NVA would embark on a feverish chase along the trail system during day and night to get units and arms deployed into the correct positions. Charlie did

not have helicopters, but thousands of porters moved disassembled heavy weapons, and ammunition on foot and special reinforced bicycles, very efficiently along these trails. A VC porter could typically push a five-hundred-pound load for several kilometers on his bike, and then pedal back for more.

After several of our LRRP teams signaled an unusual increase of enemy movement on the trails, the Brigade tasked team leader SP/5 Steimbach with a mission to find one of the NVA's regimental headquarters, suspected to be hidden deep in the Ia Drang Valley, less than twenty minutes' flight from our Oasis. Once Steimbach's "Hotel-2 Alpha" could pin down the 95th NVA Regiment's location, our air force bombers would do the rest.

Only a few years before, over three hundred G.I.s had lost their lives fighting the NVA in Ia Drang. There were no Americans in Ia Drang now; it was still Charlie's valley.

After our usual insertion at last light and uneventful first bivouac, we started our measured approach into Ia Drang early the next morning. The vegetation was dry and sparse: flat scrub jungle forest, no signs of any enemy presence. We were moving quickly, focused on getting into the valley and closer to our objective. It took us another full day and bivouac to reach the green, wet blanket of jungle that smothered the Ia Drang River.



It became darker and more ominous now, as we sank deeper into the valley... circumventing large moss-covered trees, whose snake-like roots constantly snared at our

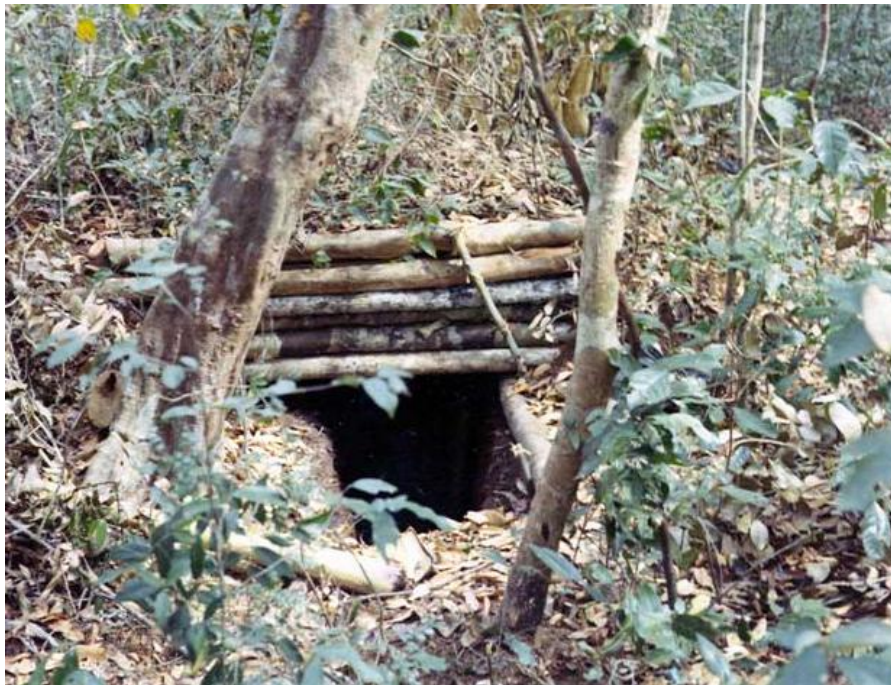
feet to trip us. Their tops reached over one hundred feet into the air, with dense triple canopies of branches blocking out the sunlight. Vines with long sharp spikes jabbed at us. The soft ground was oozing under our boots, sucking at them with an unholy tenacity, as if trying to swallow us whole. Eerie cries of disturbed birds and angry stutters of monkeys challenged us as we slowly crept through their realm. We made no noise, but they all knew perfectly well that we were there. In their jungle. It was sinister. We did not belong here. We recognized it, and so did the jungle creatures around us.

Our movement became slower, more cautious, but a sensation of exhilaration took over once we started to feel the enemy presence around us. We couldn't see Charlie yet, but we realized that he was near us. There was nothing absolute - just a well-used trail suddenly appearing directly in front, an occasional metallic clink somewhere far off, an unfamiliar rustling noise, soft echoes of digging in the distance, the sound of chopping wood, perhaps the snatches of a human voice and a faded response, the faint scent of nước mắm - the pungent Vietnamese sauce made from fermented fish. We all vaguely felt the presence of many men nearby - but where were they?

I was on point, keyed-up, eager to march nearer the trail to observe the enemy better. Now, it was risk versus gain. To see the enemy, I had to give up cover. The more I wanted to observe, the more danger I had to assume, and a boundary between calculated risk and recklessness had to be determined.

Steimbach called me back. It was too risky for the entire team to advance any closer. The men would hide in a thicket while Steimbach and I approached the enemy positions alone. We crept out silently, two shadows glued together. I focused all my attention and senses on what was in front, while Steimbach covered our flanks and rear. When my focus started to fade, we changed positions. We could move easily now without our heavy packs on our backs. I followed the trail in parallel for about an hour, just far enough away to remain concealed. It was slow and careful going because of the dense vegetation, and I was envious of Charlie, who could move quickly along that well-beaten trail just meters away from us.

Searching for the enemy base camp, I almost fell into an empty NVA fighting position! I learned what an enemy base camp really looked like. It was nothing like our base camp - that was for certain. We had airstrips and motor pools, fortified sandbagged bunkers, wooden barracks, tents, observation towers; all ringed by a gauntlet of razor-edged barbed wire protected by mines, trip flares, and motion detectors. The enemy's base had no fixed perimeter at all, just a series of mutually-supporting low earth-and-log bunkers, dug deep into the ground. Nearby fighting positions were connected by a series of trenches, and simple camp-kitchen shacks were covered by camouflaged thatched roofs. The NVA lived underground inside their bunkers. The entire complex was built under dense triple canopy tree cover, invisible from the air.



From the empty fighting position, through the bushes, we could glimpse some of the bunkers, covered with branches and leaves, and silhouettes of NVA soldiers moving around them. Steimbach brought the scope of his M-14 sniper rifle on the targets to identify weapons and equipment. I snapped a few photos with my Olympus Pen-EE camera. I took out my square plastic protractor to get the exact coordinates of the enemy base plotted on the grid square of my map. The analysts back at Intelligence were always asking for this type of information. I was in an adrenaline-fueled rush to continue to skirt the base and map out its dimensions. So far, we had seen a few bunkers, but we needed more information.

Crawling carefully alone along the empty firing positions, I suddenly heard voices in the foliage. On my knees, I silently inched closer, slowly moving the vines out of the way. A tiny window offered me a peek at two NVA soldiers in green uniforms sitting by their bunker cleaning their gear - AKs leaning by the side, and pith helmets on the ground. They were laughing and talking quietly, not looking toward me. I was fascinated, examining their faces from about eight meters away, for a moment totally forgetting where I was.

Communist soldiers right in front of me!

Then, one of the NVA, an older man with a curious expression on his face, still half smiling from a joke with his comrade, turned his eyes casually in my direction. He quickly averted his glance and continued to talk softly to his fellow soldier. I dropped to the ground in a sudden panic.

Did he spot me? No way, my face was just a black smudge in the foliage eight meters away.

I crawled silently to Steimbach and we decided to head back quickly to rejoin the team. It was far too risky to remain here much longer. An hour later, we were still following our path back paralleling the trail, when we heard the single shot...

Blapp!.. It sounded like the unique "pop" made by an AK-47. Seconds later...

Blapp!... We heard the second AK shot some distance away in response.

Steimbach froze in shock and sudden realization. The NVA were looking for us! They were already formed in a long line of troops sweeping the jungle for us - periodically, each end element would fire a shot to mark the movement of the line and to keep it straight.

We the stalkers had now become the stalked!

The single shots were still being fired randomly as we rejoined our team members, who surrounded us with great relief and excitement. No time for any explanation or rest. We had to run from that rapidly approaching line and find an LZ for our extraction. Steimbach was already on the radio explaining the situation to the Oasis.

Still on point, I was no longer quietly moving step-by-step, but running with acute determination, while trying to keep the panic at bay. I had to think about compass bearings and the directions of the LZs marked on my map. I had to be alert and think as well about the enemy who was out there looking for us.

The jungle opened suddenly and I found myself before a clearing that was thirty meters wide, facing a wall of jungle on the other side, about twenty meters away. It was not marked on my map, but a helicopter could easily land here. I relaxed. We were saved! First, however, I had to cross this clearing and secure it from the opposite side while the RTO set up his radio to call for our extraction.

I moved quickly up into the center of the clearing when a deafening blast of automatic fire suddenly let out from the underbrush directly in front. Terrified, I dropped instantly to the ground like a stone. Mechanically, I pegged the 'tok-tok-tok' sound to a Chinese RPD light machine gun that fired faster than an AK. But, I was quickly frozen with fear as the rounds were impacting just next to me, rustling up the dirt in a calm whooshing sound, like they were trying not to disturb me too much.

Whoosh... don't worry, we'll get to you soon... Whoosh... they seemed to promise maliciously.

The enemy gunner knew exactly where I was, while I could see nothing but the tall grass and green wood line in front. I hugged the ground closely, automatically focusing on the impacts of the bullets around me, and closing out who was doing the actual shooting. My immediate reaction was to push myself deeper into the ground, or make a mad dash back to the safety of the team behind me. But another blast from the RPD that blew away clumps of grass just inches from my head, told me not to run anywhere.

I pressed myself closer and deeper into the soft earth, absorbing the rich odors of torn-up grass and musky jungle vegetation. It felt safe inside here. A little green insect was crawling slowly up a broken stick directly in front of me, lifting one leg deliberately at a time, totally oblivious to the mayhem around it. Where was he going, I thought. It was not the right way...

Then, my training took over. Instinctively, I quickly low-crawled to a log that offered some flimsy cover, completely mindless of the heavy pack on my back. I still could not see the enemy at the tree line, but I made desperate eye contact with Steimbach, who was hiding behind the same tree I had used for cover just moments before making my way into the clearing. The enemy machine gunner continued to blast my log each time I raised my head to look around. Another shooter, from the same position, with an AK, peppered the tree that was used as cover by teammate Thompson.

I didn't know what to do. I just fired my CAR blindly into the dense jungle wall in front. It stifled my fear.

In this high-stress situation, the instinct to survive made my mind work in different ways. Events exploded around me in a furious flash of action, while everything appeared to be drawn out in slow motion to me. My mind separated all that was going on into individual compartments, or windows, that I could instantly address separately, and in detail. One window was the enemy in front where my mind tried to calculate the precise location of the danger, and fix the target. Another window was the personal communications established with my teammates Steimbach and Thompson, who were also alert to the same threat and working with me on a joint reaction to the enemy ambush. A third was the need to change the magazine of my weapon, or focus on the shrill cries of a wounded soldier coming from somewhere nearby. Was he one of ours?

I dealt with the stress by instinctively skipping through all the unpleasant and distracting scenes around me, and focusing only on the most significant details that had to be processed first - information that dealt immediately with the survival of our team. Blanketing my thoughts was that pervasive envelope of fear, a dark fog that threatened to overwhelm my thinking into blind panic. It was constantly pushing to frustrate my concentration and to take over.

No! I had to force myself to be alert to the situation around me, and push the fear back into its own compartment. With my full attention constantly jumping from one event to another there was little space for the fear to creep in. I crawled in small advances to get closer to the safety of the wood line in front, to try to flank the enemy, with each motion

getting a better fix on the position of our target. Steimbach and the others were providing supporting fire to cover my measured movements forward.

To keep the fear at bay, I talked to myself aloud, as if to another person... completely detached... giving myself orders.

Calm down... drop your pack... hold your fire... you can't shoot your weapon now, or the enemy will see exactly where you are... throw a grenade instead... crawl... throw another grenade... crawl closer now... don't let them see you... throw a grenade at them... get on their flank...

I had to think about constantly moving, and not getting pinned down by that machine gun.

The single AK shots were becoming more frequent now in the distance behind me. The NVA line was closing in on us from the rear. Another RPD machine gun opened up noisily on our right flank in a crossfire. Now, I finally realized that we had fallen into a well-planned ambush. We were trapped! The NVA's long search line had forced us into a bottleneck where another NVA blocking team was already waiting to hit us from both sides.

There was no way to escape from such an ambush other than to charge the NVA position directly in front because its other well-placed and hidden members on the flanks would wipe out any one of us who thought he could run through them to safety.

Steimbach gave me the hand signal to attack forward while he extended the tube of his M-72 LAW. He aimed the rocket launcher at the NVA machine gun nest directly in front of us, twenty-five meters away. The missile thundered into the tree line and exploded in a terrific crash...

** * **

Suddenly, my mind took me back to Pupukea on the North Shore of Oahu not so long ago. It was a windy ten-foot day; I was paddling out on my longboard. The waves were steep lefts and curling very fast. My heart was in my throat each time I saw the exposed

coral heads below, as I pulled back at the last moment letting the waves go by me one by one. I was beyond my limits, panic creeping in. Then, finally, I saw a big dark wall that was curling up angrily behind me. I had to take off now or be smashed on the shallow reef! I exhaled all the air from my lungs and dug my arms fast and deep into the water, flexing my weight forward to get quickly over the lip, take the fearful vertical drop, cut left, and make my escape....

** * **

I forgot all about my heavy rucksack abandoned by the log, tore myself from the ground, and ran like the wind towards the smoke marking the impact of Steimbach's rocket, firing my CAR in rapid bursts. There was no more fear - just desperation and determination.

My turn to shoot now!

My fear had been transformed into a blind rage towards the enemy who had stirred up this ugly fear inside me. An overwhelming instinct to destroy them all took over. Nothing could stop me from obliterating the enemy in front. Nothing!

Brrrrtttt... Brrrrtttt... Brrrrtttt...

Reloading, I fired again and again, ripping the magazines rapidly from my pouches, and ran by the twisted RPD lying uselessly on the ground.

Brrrrtttt... Brrrrtttt... Brrrrtttt...

I just fired and ran, not even looking at the crumpled bodies under my feet, only trying to get past the trap that had been set for us. My teammates were also running wildly right behind me without looking or stopping, occasionally shooting into the green jungle around us. We were all running for our lives.

We ran towards the nearest LZ marked on our map, where fifteen minutes later, the extraction chopper was hovering over us. I waved my orange signal panel frantically at the bird to guide it in, while one of the door gunners was already blasting the tree line behind us. The other support gunships were firing their miniguns furiously at the NVA pursuing us.

With seconds to spare, we all scrambled on the skid of the Huey, and pulled ourselves madly up to safety. Steimbach, last man on board, gave me a wild grin of relief, as he wriggled his shoulders out of the straps of his heavy pack.

Another successful mission without any casualties.



We had survived the firefight, and were sprawled out, drained, on the cold metal deck of the helicopter, hearts pounding, with the howl of the rotors in our ears, as the chopper dipped its nose, brutally clawing its way up to safety in the sky. The explosive bursts from the door gunners' M-60s chattering madly around us was deafening - but did not drown out snatches of the song blaring from the pilots' 8-track tape in the cockpit up front:

Ghost riders in the sky...

A'plowin' through the ragged skies and up a cloudy draw...

Their faces gaunt, their eyes were blurred, and shirts all soaked with sweat

They're ridin' hard to catch that herd but they ain't caught them yet

*They've got to ride forever in that range up in the sky
On horses snortin' fire, as they ride on, hear their cry
Ghost riders in the sky...*



We were no longer afraid. That old elation we all felt at the start of the mission had come back to us again.

Every LRRP mission followed that same mad cycle of emotions for me; exhilaration to panic and back to exhilaration - having to deal with the fear exactly the same way each time as before. I lived each day, one at a time, not imagining any kind of future other than the daily combat patrols in the jungle, and the constant uneasy presentiment of an enemy contact lurking right around the corner.

Could I just make it until it turned dark?

But the fear became a constant companion. It was always there, mocking and challenging me to see who would end on top. Sometimes, I became more afraid of my own fear than of the actual enemy. At the same time, I watched some of the new replacements on our teams under fire, wild-eyed with a frozen expression of terror on their faces. They were not looking at me for support, but were shooting their weapons blindly at anything. They were going to die soon, I knew instinctively. I did not want to end up like that, and fought to overcome my fear.

* * *

That mission in the Ia Drang Valley changed everything for me. From reading my books as a teenager, I had always imagined war being a great adventure... a noble struggle between good and evil. When I first arrived in-country, contact with the enemy was almost like a game to me. It did not feel like I was shooting at actual people; I was only aiming at paper targets that popped up suddenly in front of me, exactly like on the firing range. I was either too confident or just plain too dumb to be really afraid - convinced that my training and skills were superior, and that there was no way I could even get hurt. I was on a quest to fight Communism; my cause was just, and my Guardian Angel would surely protect me from all harm. At the same time, it never occurred to me that I would also be hunted myself - by an enemy with the same determination to track and kill me! An enemy who had already been fighting for many years and knew the jungle much better than I did. After Ia Drang, I was no longer so sure that I was bulletproof.

I learned that the secret to survival was to be alert, constantly alert - my entire body dedicated to act as a delicate sensor that carefully measured and evaluated every visual observation, sound, smell, touch, feeling, around me... always calculating how that combined sense of perception could affect my future and security. A constant urge to search for better cover and concealment... A constant compulsion to keep moving, and not remain still in one place to become a target.

The soldiers who dared to daydream while on patrol, even for a few seconds, or just mechanically followed in the footsteps of their mates in front, or became oblivious potheads, were the first of us to die. But, new innocent replacements straight from boot camp arrived quickly, and the entire selection process would be repeated again in the jungle.

Our LRRP missions were remarkably alike in nature. First, was the exhilaration that we all felt going into an insertion together near last light, wind whistling through our ears, feet hanging over the sides of the Huey, weapons locked and loaded - expecting a hostile reception on the ground. Jumping off and forming a defensive position, hearts pounding, we waited until the jungle was back to normal again, listening for any sounds from the enemy. Then, moving very slowly forward to get away from the LZ, we set up a secure night location. No more talking for five days and nights, just whispers and hand signals. The team members were very close to one another and each knew exactly what to do, or immediately understood what had to be done just by looking into the eyes of his mates.

This close personal bond assured the success of our missions as well as our own survival. Five individual soldiers, but all fused together in common purpose, conviction, determination, trust, and faith. The teams had an unwritten rule. No one was left behind on a mission. We all went in together and we all came out together as one - alive, wounded, or dead.

Typically, in the Army, we had little choice about selecting and keeping our friends. We were stuck with people we either liked or disliked, but we all rapidly became indispensable to one another. On a mission where the survival of the entire team was at stake, everyone instinctively became very close.

March 1968; I had survived six missions in the jungle as a LRRP trainee on probation. I was sent to the 5th Special Forces RECONDO School in Nha Trang for more advanced patrolling training, and qualify to become a LRRP team leader in the future. The Special Forces PROJECT DELTA created the Reconnaissance Commando or RECONDO program in 1966, which years later, would give its name to the elite DELTA FORCE. This was an extremely rigorous course focused on physical endurance, patrolling tactics, marksmanship, and land navigation - a combat mission completed under actual enemy fire was a graduation requirement. The attrition rate grew very quickly when fifty percent of our Airborne classmates, including a few recent graduates of the tough Ranger School at Ft. Benning, were sent back to their units after failing the demanding land navigation pre-qualification course. A recce team leader needed many special skills, but if he could not find

his own position on the map, accurately and very quickly, then it was better for him to move on to another line of work.

Fortunately for me, just over a year ago, I was a geology student at the University of Hawaii, learning how to draft my own topographic maps using surveying tools. In my college class, we practiced squinting our eyes in cross-eyed vision, holding two maps or aerial photos side-by-side, to be able to see the topographic relief in three dimensions. Hiking through the dense jungles of Hawaii on weekends, map and compass in hand, also prepared me well for Vietnam. I was confident using a topo map; and occasionally could better some of the land navigation calculations made by the senior Special Forces instructors in our class.



The day's training began in the early morning darkness with a grueling modified Airborne PT calisthenics workout that included hundreds of jumping jacks, squat jumps, push-ups, leg lifts, sit-ups, pull-ups, lunges... all in rapid succession, wearing our combat boots, and without any rest. Our PT instructors watched us closely. If anyone made the slightest mistake, slowed down, or lost count, the punishment was additional push-ups - hundreds of them. After more than an hour of this non-stop relentless pure torture, we would complete a very fast five-mile run. Good thing I was already used to running from the NVA in the jungle with a heavy pack on my back.

The daily all-out long distance runs were the toughest for me, however. Once I had reached the point of total exhaustion, it was so tempting to slow down or just fall out – and be washed out of the course. But I stayed glued right behind our sadistic trainer in the hypnotic ordeal, mechanically trying to synchronize my steps with my breathing. Lungs on fire, I set aside pain and fatigue... one more step... just one more step. I thought that I was in great shape by now, but the Special Forces could always find another way to make me suffer. By the time morning classes started my entire body was an aching mess.

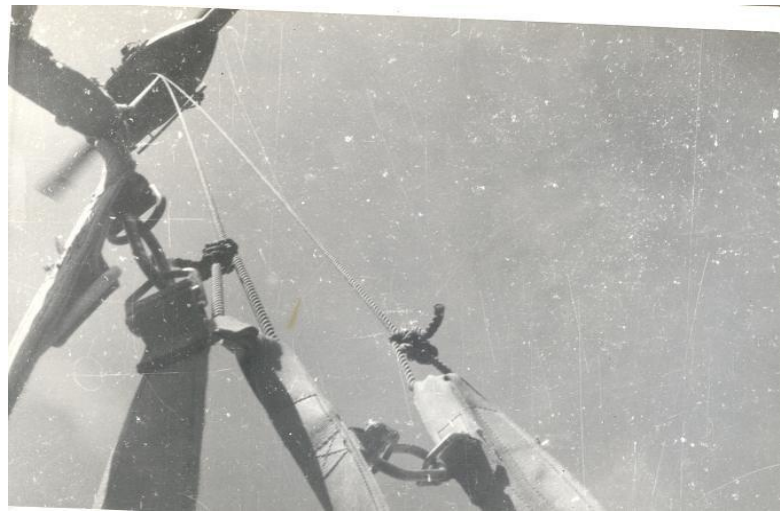
The field exercises were reserved for the afternoons when we were all starting to doze off from the exhaustion. We were each issued a thirty-pound sandbag that we had to carry around everywhere, always while running. Our wily instructors conducted surprise inspections to check the weights of the bags - that quickly eliminated an additional number of our classmates who had dared to tamper with them.

We ran all the time, during field exercises, as well as inside the barracks, to our meals and back, to the showers, to our bunks... Always in motion. Those of us, who were caught slowing down or resting, were punished with hundreds of push-ups. The Special Forces' mantra was never to be stationary, unless hiding in an ambush or observation position - under total concealment. A moving target was much harder for the enemy to hit.

This constant compulsion to move eventually became an automatic instinct of survival for me. Decades later, the urge to remain in motion would still be an integral part of me, as I would energetically scurry around inside my own house, embassy offices, or diplomatic receptions. I just felt too vulnerable standing around, or sitting still in one place.

In RECONDO, we practiced some novel emergency helicopter extraction techniques for jungle terrain where LZs were lacking. The McGuire rig, better known as "the string," consisted of three 120-foot Goldline nylon climbing ropes tossed from a Huey on a sandbag down to the team in distress on the ground. Attached to the ends of the ropes were three simple six-foot loops of two-inch wide nylon webbing for me and my two teammates to sit in, interlocking our arms and feet for balance and security.

While the three of us were still assimilating what was about to happen to us, based on the short technical brief given by our grinning Green Berets, the ropes were already jerking us abruptly off the ground. As the helicopter dragged us up through the trees and into the air - soon at a hundred miles per hour - I was madly kicking away at the approaching trunks and branches. No need to worry about being shot by the enemy while swinging in the air, because if the rope became stuck, a member of the chopper crew was always ready with a machete to cut us loose in a heartbeat to save the aircraft. Welcome to Special Forces!



Dangling in a playground swing at five thousand feet to escape enemy ground fire, the three of us were frozen together in one great lump, clinging to each other and our weapons and gear, while desperately trying not to move our butts even an inch on the uncomfortable, tight nylon straps - the only thing keeping us from falling off. I thought about Special Forces DELTA Sergeant Major Charles T. McGuire, who two years before, had devised this unique extraction system -- was it for real, or just used to scare the shit out of the RECONDO trainees? A year later, Special Forces abandoned the McGuire rig in favor of a special body harness that snapped directly into the helicopter swing ropes - too many men had fallen out of the McGuire.



Our instructors briefed us about yet another exciting exfiltration technique invented a few years earlier by the CIA, called the SKYHOOK, and reserved for Special Forces' emergency extractions in Laos. This one used a small helium balloon to lift a steel cable

high into the sky to be snagged by a slow-flying C-130 aircraft. The man being pulled out put on a harness connected to this cable and sat with arms crossed, back to the wind, waiting to be suddenly jerked off the ground at one hundred-twenty-five miles per hour! He was then winched up slowly into the plane. Fortunately, Special Forces had run out of SKYHOOK packages for our trainees, and we were spared this demonstration. But the U.S. Army's newly-minted 1968 Field Manual No. 31-18 on LRRP operations reminded us that SKYHOOK could one day still be a part of our expected extraction techniques.



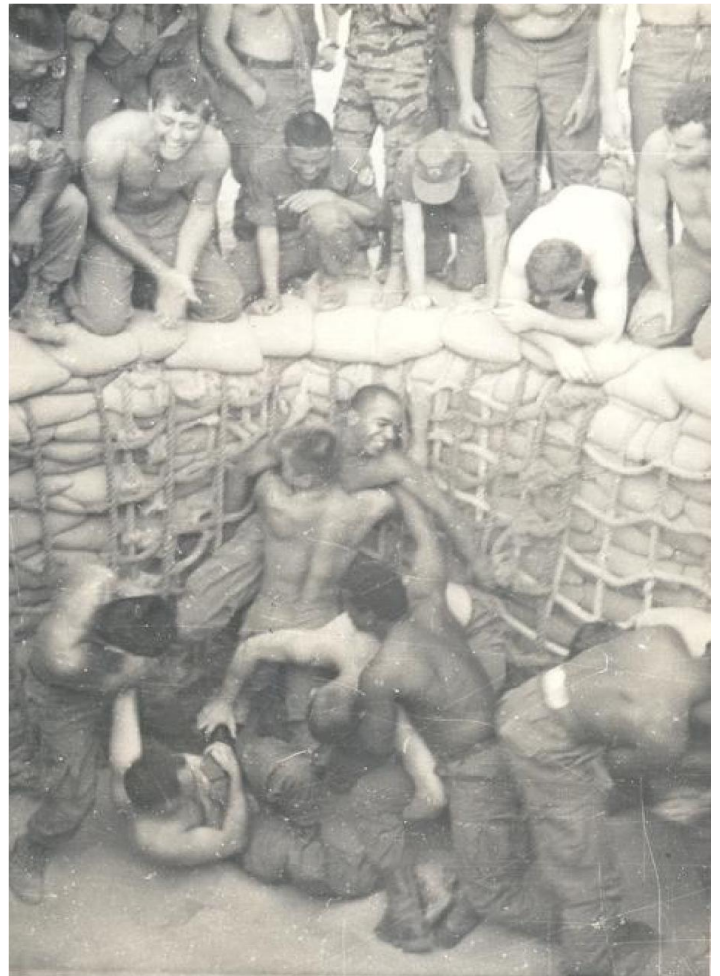
2-4. Capabilities

The organization, strength, and equipment of an LRRP is based on its assigned mission and the environment of the operational area. An LRRP has the capability to—

- a. Conduct training and preparation for its assigned missions.
- b. Be committed in specific locations within enemy-held territory by stay-behind methods, or be delivered by land, water, or air, to include parachute.
- c. Operate in enemy-held territory for several days.
- d. Establish communications between the company base stations or the controlling headquarters and other operating patrols directly or through an aerial relay link.
- e. Conduct operations in inclement weather and over difficult terrain.
- f. Operate with austere support.
- g. Be recovered by air (to include Skyhook techniques), land, or water; to linkup with advancing forces; or to return, using escape and evasion techniques.
- h. Be equipped and trained for employment in any theater of operations.

After our training in the air, my favorite exercise was practicing night landings in strong surf with a rubber raft; weapons and gear secured in the middle. We surfed the waves in to the beach, just like in Hawaii. But when I would float in the water, exhausted, the instructors would toss me a heavy weight with which I had to swim to the beach. Choking and cursing while being dragged under, I thought that it might be a good thing to be posted in the Central Highlands where there was no open water to deal with.

And still our ordeal was not over. An interesting diversion waited for us in an eight-foot-deep sand pit lined with a cargo net, resembling an empty swimming pool. I was dropped inside together with my other four teammates, along with an opposing team of the same number. The objective of each team was to work together, use strategy, to get the other team tossed out of the pit first.



We had the bad luck of facing the Korean Tiger Division's elite recon team, all black belts in taekwon-do. We had no time for strategizing, as the Koreans attacked us with a vengeance, using arm locks and hard jabs, while someone on top was politely trying to explain to them that only pushing and pulling was allowed; no strikes or punches. Either the Koreans did not understand the English instructions well, or they were taking the training a little too seriously, but there was no way that a bunch of American G.I.s were

going to push them out of that pit! Our instructors quickly stopped the match before any bones were broken.

The final torture devised for us by our instructors was a seven-mile run with weapon, and full combat kit weighing over twenty pounds, plus the rucksack loaded maliciously with that thirty-pound sandbag. The constant thumping of the uneven heavy load on my back while running quickly chafed my skin raw, forming a grapefruit-sized lesion. Exhausted after the run, we had to climb the rope ladder of the forty-foot rappelling tower and then descend hand over hand on a knotted rope, carrying our weapon, gear, and that damn sandbag - juggling fifty pounds on our shoulders. Two times! I made the seven-mile sandbag run in less than sixty minutes, but my back was a mess. Those of us who finished this ordeal, wore our white bandages proudly, ready for the final combat mission of the course.



The RECONDO School in Vietnam was infamous for its final exercise, dubbed “Bet Your Life,” that one had to survive to get his special RECONDO number and coveted graduate black “V” patch. It was a five-day reconnaissance mission in enemy territory designed to test all we had learned under actual fire, with a Special Forces advisor along to watch us closely. The students were put into dangerous areas under conditions resulting in a hundred percent certainty of trading shots with the enemy. It was part of the course - a

prospective RECONDO team leader had to be tested under actual enemy fire before being allowed to graduate. This was the only such training course in the entire U.S. military.

Having achieved a perfect score in the marksmanship class, where I followed a jungle trail while shooting rapidly at silhouette targets concealed in the foliage, and hitting a tiny tree stump with my anti-tank rocket, I was awarded the point for our combat test mission - my favorite position.

Problems started immediately upon our insertion. The pilot spotted a small group of VC heading our way as soon as he dropped us and asked on the radio if we planned to abort our mission.

No way... was the response of the Special Forces sergeant, who advised me to move out quickly in the same compass direction that the enemy was heading. We were going to advance straight for a while and then loop back around to get behind the VC who were following us.

"We'll have our firefight soon and be back in Nha Trang before evening," our sergeant promised us with a cocky grin.

I started out at a moderate pace with the advisor following just a few meters behind me, the RTO in the middle, and rear security keeping a close watch of what was behind him. The vegetation was low, scrub and bushes offering good concealment; nothing was hindering our progress. We deliberately left broken branches and footprints on the ground. An hour or so later, when the terrain flattened out, we picked up the pace, but now being very careful not to leave traces behind. We started our sharp arc to the right to double back on our old tracks - hopefully positioning ourselves behind the VC now.

An hour later, we had crept up back to our old trail and slowed down for intense observation, ready to engage the enemy at any time. I was excited as usual when overcome by the sensation that the enemy was nearby. At the same time, I was at ease, thinking about having a real combat expert walking right behind me. We were safe with our Special Forces sergeant on the team.

A deafening volley of automatic fire directly behind me shattered my peace of mind. I froze in shock. Less than ten meters to my left, a green bush was running madly towards the shelter of a nearby draw, quickly disappearing from sight. A second bush popped up from the ground and was following closely behind. I turned, and saw our advisor carefully squeezing out several three-round bursts from his CAR at the fast-moving target - a VC whose entire body was camouflaged with tree branches! The branches were flying off his body one by one, as he was running for his life.

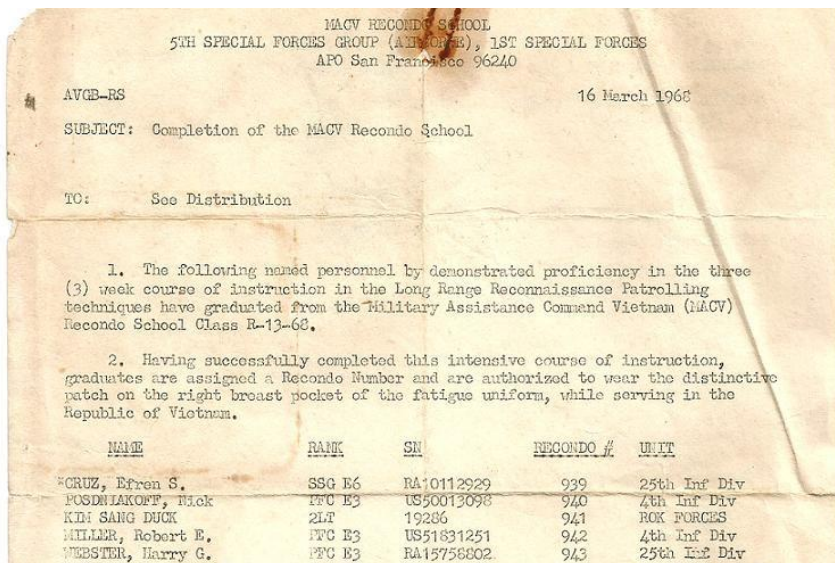
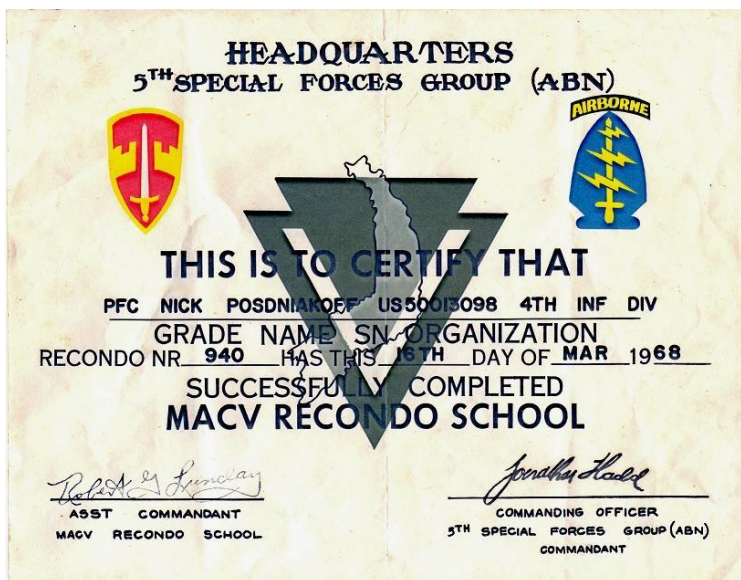
Brrrrtttt... Brrrrtttt... Brrrrtttt...

Too late. The first burst kicked up dirt next to him, the second hit the legs collapsing him immediately into a heap, while the third jerked his body upwards in a last reluctant spasm to let go of life. It was over in five seconds. I was stunned. I had walked by the two camouflaged enemy soldiers while looking directly at them. I thought that they were just bushes. They were waiting for me to pass first, and then spring the ambush on our team. Our sergeant had instinctively picked up a slight suspicious movement and fired first. How the hell could I have missed all this on point?

No time for reflection, the sound of breaking branches was coming from the draw below us - a small, deep ravine covered completely by dense jungle. It sounded like the remaining VC were desperately trying to escape down into it. We tossed all our grenades after them. Ten muffled thuds, one after another, and then total silence. Thirty minutes later, we were back in Nha Trang with our Special Forces sergeant buying us cold beers at the NCO club. We were the first team back.

I had the highest scores in my class in map reading and marksmanship, and best time in the seven-mile sandbag run (after the Koreans), but did not get the top prize: an engraved presentation knife reserved for the honor graduate. Only twenty-five of us remained in RECONDO Class R-13-68 to finally graduate. More than three-quarters of my original classmates were already gone from the course. My performance on point on the final mission had almost washed me out as well.

RECONDO Graduate No. 940. No knife, but I was still alive. SSG Efren Cruz from the 25th Div. LRRPs got the coveted "Recondo Honor Graduate" knife in our class, but I knew that he was way behind me on all the runs, and did not get a perfect score on the map navigation and shooting exercises.



April 12, 1968. I returned to the Oasis from Nha Trang with my brand-new black RECONDO arrowhead graduate patch. My teammates were huddled in their tents, somber; some weighed down with grief, others furious. Team leader of "Hotel-2-Alpha," Joe Steimbach, had just been killed in action. Thompson gave me the bad news: while the enemy was assaulting Steimbach's team during a surprise evening contact, a new patrol member threw his grenade short. This knocked Steimbach to the ground. Before the other team members could react, the NVA had already emptied their weapons into his helpless body.

Joe was one of the most experienced team leaders in the LRRPs; he had trained me inside those VC tunnels not so long ago. I was hit by a cold wave of shock from the loss. His Vietnam tour was just about over and he had already been packing out to return home.

If he could be killed so easily, what might happen to the rest of us?

* * *



Swedish-K, 9mm



Grease Gun, 45 Cal.

Our contacts with the enemy were picking up steadily. After the lull following the Tet Offensive, military supplies were moving from Communist China by rail into North Vietnam, then trucked south through neutral Cambodia to be hauled by thousands of porters towards the Ia Drang Valley in South Vietnam. The CIA and Special Forces teams monitored the movement of convoys along the maze of parallel dirt roads hidden under the dense triple canopy jungle and coordinated with the Air Force to bomb them. Our LRRP teams would often be inserted after a bombing run to assess the damage, look for heavy weapons that were not destroyed, and make a count of the enemy casualties.

One night, I was relaxing on the ground, quietly digging a shallow hole in the dirt with my Gerber combat knife. "Hotel-2-Charlie" was setting up for its night location, deep in the jungle near the Cambodian border. We had a long march in front of us the next day, so I wanted to be comfortable during our first night out. I never liked sleeping on the hard uneven ground and would meticulously carve out the profile of my back into the packed-down soil with my knife. I knew I would not be doing it the next night, as I would be much too exhausted by then.

At the same time, I carefully cleared the space around me of all twigs and leaves that could make a noise if I moved around during the night. Then, in the event the enemy probed us in the dark, I would not give him an easy target to aim at.

We set up our perimeter defense system for the night. This was a very fine green wire, thin as a hair, and virtually invisible, that was unwound from a small hand spool, and carefully tightened along the bushes all around us in a large circle, a few feet off the ground. The two ends were connected to a small green control box powered by a flashlight battery, which was kept alongside the radio, in the team's center. If the wire was broken during the night, as by a VC counter-recon sapper silently stepping on it, the interruption of the current in the wire would cause the control box to chirp softly like an insect, and flash a tiny red warning light. This would instantly alert the team's night guard on duty.

Our four Claymore mines were placed inside this alarm wire enclosure, a safe distance away from us, facing outward. If the alarm was triggered by the enemy searching for us in the dark, then the four Claymores would be blown at once in a 360-degree circle, while the team was already rushing away toward the pre-planned helicopter extraction LZ, a few hundred meters away. The compass bearings to the emergency LZs were rehearsed, and calibrated on each team member's instrument each night, before turning in. A quick "mayday" call on the radio would send rescue helicopters from the Oasis to the preselected LZ and rally point.

We were all following strict LRRP rules. Plan ahead and you may stay alive for another mission.

Night was falling and my teammates were gradually stopping their final adjustment of weapons and gear. We were quietly settling into our private thoughts. What is going to happen to me tomorrow? When will I run into Charlie? How many of them will be chasing me this time?

A drawn-out rattling wail, reminding me somewhat of a large popcorn machine, in the distance, startled me - I sat up in alarm. Several miles away, the sky was lighting up in an eerie progression of bright mushroom domes flickering rapidly down a straight line. Each time a mushroom popped, the clouds in the dark sky above would flash back in an equally ominous-glowing reflection. An ARC LIGHT strike, with series of silent and invisible B-52 aircraft, six miles above us, each carrying thirty tons of bombs, dropped on the NVA hunkered down in their earth-and-log bunkers that we had recently mapped and marked for Second Brigade S-2 Intelligence. How many of them were going to survive this?



The next day, we were instructed to proceed to an area previously suspected of storing NVA supplies to conduct a bomb damage assessment. After a typical bombing run, most targets hit directly by the B-52s were vaporized. Neither did the enemy often leave any serviceable weapons or bodies behind for us to count. Our team approached the positions that had been occupied by the NVA just the day before with great caution. Total devastation. A barren lunar landscape greeted us, dotted with a crazy pattern of swimming pool-sized craters, some up to thirty feet deep. No sign of life here.

I climbed up and down the empty bomb craters, looking for clues, but the only items that regularly appeared to survive the B-52 blasts were the heavy rubber sandals worn by the NVA porters, made from used Chinese truck tires. We made a pile of them during our searches and tallied them up at the end. Divided by two, they gave a rough estimate of the enemy casualties. The bean counters, sitting inside their safe bunkers at S-2 would be happy with the numbers.



Anxious to escape from the devastation, we called in the choppers to return us to the Oasis empty-handed. I learned later from S-2, that within just a week, the bomb craters were filled in and a new road was snaking around them. Chinese trucks once more were flowing Chinese arms down the Trail into South Vietnam. The CIA and U.S. Air Force were busy planning new bombing missions.

A few months later, President Johnson announced a total halt of the bombing of the North. Our recce teams observed an immediate upswing of weapons moving on the Ho Chi Minh trail into Pleiku Province from Cambodia. These would soon be used against our troops in South Vietnam. U.S. Air Force "Operation Rolling Thunder" was over. Nothing was stopping the southward flow of Communist weapons now. One-hundred-truck-long enemy convoys were moving brazenly in broad daylight, straight down the Trail, along the neutral side of the border!

* * *

May 1968. I was on point on a patrol when we heard voices in a thick jungle draw below us. Teammate Naccarato and I inched forward to see who was talking. Ten meters

away, we spotted two persons in khaki shirts sitting against a tree, calmly eating their meal, partially concealed by the foliage. They looked like VC. Since they were below and not looking up, they could not see us yet. Our rules of engagement were clear; we could not shoot unless we saw weapons, which were not visible because of the thick foliage. I used the scope on my CAR-15 to look for a weapon. I scanned to the face of the younger owner of khaki shirt leaning up against the tree nearest to me, examining it casually.

It was relaxed, smiling, not suspecting that unexpected danger was so close...

Brrrrttt.... a sudden blast of automatic weapons fire deafened me.

Without any warning, Naccarato had fired a full magazine at the two targets below us, startling me also to squeeze off a single shot unintentionally from my CAR.

Blappp....

Wait! Why did I shoot?

“Got him!” Naccarato cried out excitedly.

I carefully moved down to the trees, behind cover, and saw a body face down. Naccarato tossed a grenade just in case his comrade was still nearby. I turned the body over to search for weapons and documents, the skin was already turning gray... the top of the skull was gone and the brains fell out neatly on my boots. It reminded me randomly of a chocolate Easter rabbit after you bit off its head - all dark and hollow inside.

I recoiled. Did we actually do this or was this body somehow here already? I thought about the crosshairs of my scope focusing on his face just seconds before the bullet had hit. Only five minutes earlier, we were casually making our way through the silent jungle, not expecting anything to happen - and now this!

We brought up his pack and searched for weapons, but there were only clothes, a pair of cheap tiny plastic sandals, and a small plastic doll - gifts for his family in the village.

Naccarato repeated that he saw AKs, and that the other VC took them and ran. I had my doubts.

Naccarato continued to repeat breathlessly that he "got that gook."

I was glad that he was so sure, but felt very bad about the person who was dead at our feet. He wore khakis and was hiding in the jungle, but without proof of a weapon, I was not convinced that he was really the enemy. I had a heavy, uneasy sensation about this and a feeling of deep regret, but Naccarato kept boasting about having killed a man.

It happened much too fast. We should not have fired so quickly. We saw no weapons and shot. In the end, we rolled his body into a ditch and just left. In parting, Naccarato kicked the small plastic doll into the grave after it.

I had volunteered for Vietnam to fight the Communists, but this was not what I had expected.



Searching "Naccarato's gook" for a weapon



Naccarato

Poz

* * *

The next week, I was back out on a mission in the Catecka Tea Plantation, not far from the Oasis. Because this plantation provided an income for the local civilian economy in the Pleiku area, U.S. forces were prohibited from interfering with its operation, entering its

boundaries, or firing any artillery inside. This offered a perfect sanctuary for the VC units to stage their sneak attacks on Camp Enari and the Oasis at night. Our team was instructed to sniff around the edges of the plantation, and perhaps just take a little peek inside - discreetly. No shooting.... just reconnaissance.

I was on point, silently entering the low, open forest protecting the delicate tea shrubs, near sunset, when all workers were supposed to be gone from the area. Suddenly, I heard voices in front of me. It sounded like a dozen men celebrating something joyfully in a thicket. I crossed a small clearing, took off my pack, and alone, slowly inched forward on my stomach towards the voices, while the rest of the team remained back at the clearing, covering me. Closer and closer I crept - until finally getting a blurred glimpse through the leaves of a group of men in khakis and black pajamas, sitting on the ground, talking, laughing, and loading gear into their backpacks. I started to crawl back slowly to my team when the noise from the strangers stopped abruptly. It was dead quiet around me now. Not a sound...

I tiptoed quickly off the ground and sprinted softly to the clearing, grabbing my rucksack, and alerting the team to draw back immediately across the open field, to set up a hasty defensive position on the other side. We wanted to have a clear view of who might be coming after us, as well as have a clear field of fire. We were all lying low in the grass, concealed behind small bushes, nervously anticipating what would happen next.

Seconds later, a tiny Montagnard scout in black shorts and faded khaki shirt came into view on the opposite side of our clearing, fifty meters away, examining the ground closely where my heavy rucksack had lain just minutes before.

Then, a small, scruffy, brown Beagle-looking dog, with long, floppy ears appeared at the Montagnard's side. The 'Yard was talking softly to him and nudging him on towards our direction. Beagle took a reluctant sniff and went to the right. He then took another sniff, and corrected his course to the left. Two more zigzags, and Beagle was now heading unerringly straight for me, lying flat on the ground, concealed behind a tiny bush. The 'Yard was just to the side of the dog, stepping carefully and silently forward from one foot to the

other, like a duck hunter softly approaching his unsuspecting targets. Ten more meters and they would both be on top of me!

I lifted rapidly to my knees and pointed my CAR directly on the 'Yard - yelling... "Dừng Lại!"... Stop!

But the 'Yard panicked, and sprinted off diagonally in a frenzy, leaving his damn hound by my side - still wagging its tail proudly at me.

I fired a full burst from my CAR at the running 'Yard - but high and to the side, missing him by a mile.

Maybe it was that sad-looking dog... or maybe because the 'Yard did not have a weapon in his hands. But, more likely, it was the memory of "Naccarato's gook," still fresh on my mind, that stopped me from instinctively shooting him in center body mass.

** * **

The surprising thing about killing is how easy it was. All you had to do was point your weapon and pull the trigger. It happened every day, usually at the most unexpected moments, and often not even intentionally. It was the civilians who suffered the heaviest toll, but no one appeared really to care. A gook was a gook. Young or old, male or female, adult or child, armed or unarmed. They were all the same: The enemy! The faces of the civilians looking at us clearly showed fear and hatred.

How could we win this war if the people were against us?

** * **

I didn't like to look at the violence that we wreaked with our weapons during our surprise ambushes. Witnessing each death, even of an enemy, took a little piece out of my own life. Once the enemy soldier was hurt and could no longer pose a risk, my instincts told me to treat his wounds with the same attention as given to my teammates.

They, however, looked at me with a strange incomprehension...

"Wait a minute... you've just tried to kill this gook - and are now trying to save his life?!" ... What the hell for?... They reproached me.

Each life that was preserved made up in a small way for the other lives taken by us. Perhaps, at twenty-two, I had a different outlook on life than some of the eighteen-year-olds in our unit. Many of them had not even finished high school; they were just youngsters, tossed involuntarily into a strange new country, into a war they could not understand. Some of them were not even old enough to drink a beer back home, drive a car alone after dark, or vote. But in Vietnam, they could shoot people. The sixteen-week combat infantry training focused on one thing - kill the gooks because they were threatening our freedoms and democracy.

"Charlie, Gooks, Dinks, and 'Yards" - they weren't real people like us.

Many of my teammates would shoot without a second thought, including at unarmed civilians. In a war, was all justified to win or survive? No one was there to tell them right from wrong. Often, I did not know myself. Hell, I had just turned twenty-two.

Years later, many of my younger teammates in the LRRPs would join the ranks of abandoned veterans, forgotten and ignored, disabled by guilt, PTSD, drug and alcohol abuse, failed marriages, motorcycle accidents, unfinished education, and no employment prospects. To me, at the time, some of them just seemed like carefree, unconcerned teenagers who had been given guns to play with.

** * **

The NVA and VC were formidable foes. Both fought hard and with a desperate determination. Their Soviet and Chinese-supplied weapons were modern and effective. Unlike our troops which served only a twelve-month tour in the jungle and then went home, the Vietnamese soldiers were in the war for the duration. They had combat experience and were used to the shelling. When charging us, often they were not afraid to die. They knew exactly what they were fighting for.

What the enemy lacked, however, was sufficient food and medical care in the jungle, and a method of quick resupply such as the aircraft used by our own forces. To survive, the NVA and VC avoided direct confrontations with our larger units in the field, and resorted to guerrilla strategy and hit-and-run tactics. We owned the towns while they controlled the jungle around them.

At night, this informal ownership formula was often disputed.

Faced with the clear superiority of U.S. firepower, the Communists had to wage psychological warfare. The LRRPs fought back the same way. Our team, "Hotel-2-Charlie," was sent out on HUNTER-KILLER missions to set up ambushes on trails that were carefully selected to provide maximum observation and escape options for us. Having scored "expert" in my infantry marksmanship course, I was picked to carry the bulky M-14 sniper rifle; but sometimes, instead, a more compact suppressed M-16 weapon loaded with special ammunition, and the "Starlight" night vision scope. This silent weapon fired reliably to only 25 meters in single shot mode, so we had to plan our night ambushes with great care to have both a good line of sight to the targets, and a fast route to the extraction LZ.



Our bulky electronic "Starlight" night scope was used only for special missions as it was fragile and temperamental compared to its more robust optical counterpart. Often, after a rough helicopter landing and a few days in the rain, it simply did not turn on when you really needed it. I had to nurse it like a temperamental baby... Weighing in at six pounds, the scope was as almost as heavy as the M-16 rifle it was attached to, and presented a real handful when running from the enemy at night. After trying out both weapons, I preferred the trusty M-14 that I was used to shooting during the past year in Germany.



My M-14



Silenced 16



Concealed by bushes, sitting frozen-still in the ambush position, I slid the crosshairs of my scope directly to the center body mass of my target - an NVA soldier carrying a heavy pack, rifle in his hands, marching along the dark trail slowly towards me. My right eye burning from total concentration focused on and swallowed the hazy green image of the target whole through the night scope. I could already feel him deep inside my stomach.

Now I had to spit him out. Muscles were relaxed but slowly tensing together, connecting to the form of my target in front. My heart and breathing were slowing down while my entire body tingled softly in anticipation. Finger just touching the trigger, gradually taking the slack out... ever so lightly... exhaling...



Ambush

TAKKK... The long black suppressor made a dry snap, a little louder than a BB gun, while the victim sensed the crack of the bullet and its impact only when it was already too late. He collapsed silently to the ground.

We fired at the first available enemy targets with calculated single shots, and during the ensuing confusion, ran for the pre-planned LZs to make a quick escape. The enemy survivors returned to their camp with a frightening story about meeting death - silently and unexpectedly - on the jungle trails in the dark.

This was only a small payback for the way the VC responded to our Division's daytime Civic Action Affair programs to inoculate the remote villagers against diseases. The NVA political commissars would sneak into the village later at night and chop off the arms of anyone who had received the shots from the American medics. A warning not to take anything from the "imperialist foreign occupiers."

Unlike the LRRPs, the VC and NVA had to use their trail systems day and night. Our objective was to put a sense of gnawing doubt into their lives. Was it really safe to walk

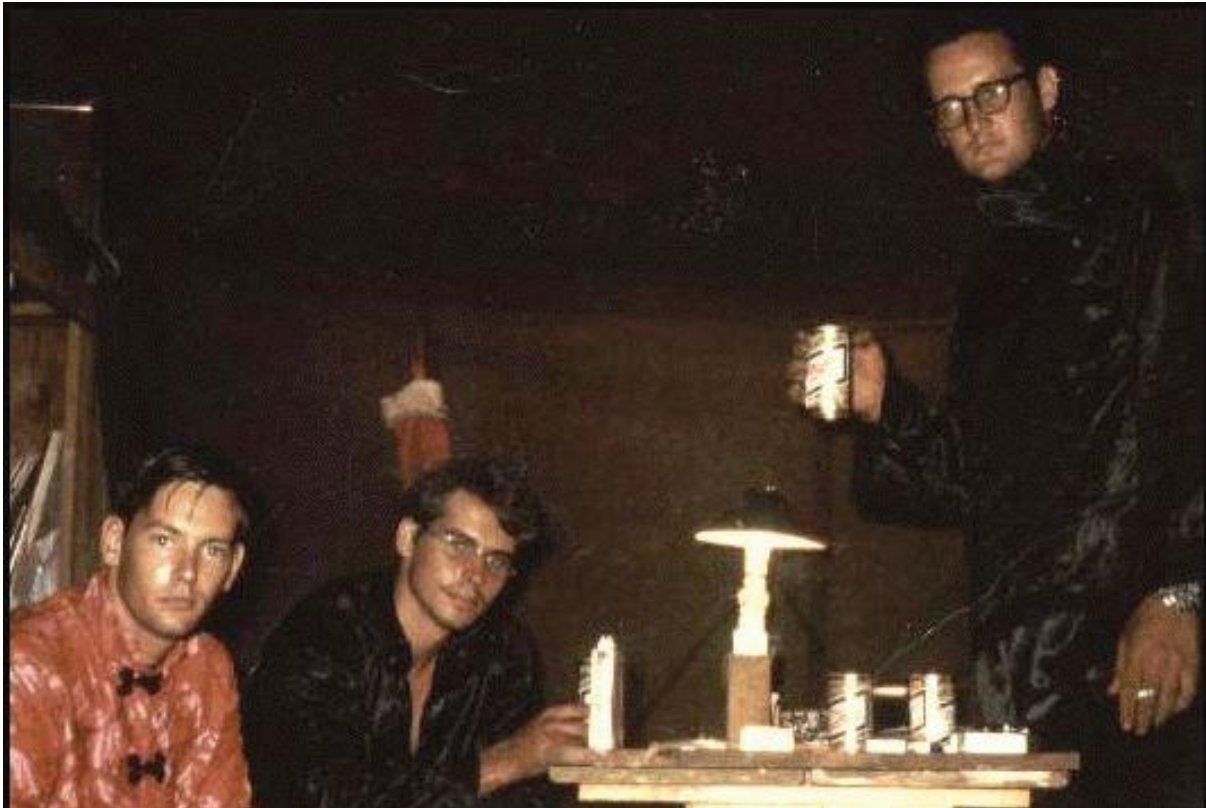
down this jungle trail tonight? When and where would the black-faced American devils try to hit us next?

This kind of lingering uncertainty could ratchet up fear of the unknown in the enemy and seriously affect his morale and fighting capabilities. Psychological warfare could only be responded to in the same hard way.

Jarvis

Poz

Courtney



Black PJ Party... back from our Night Moves in the jungle

Some of the LRRPs took me to their tailor in Thanh An village to be fitted for a pair of black pajamas for our special night moves in the jungle. They worked fine in the dark, but during the day, no one was very keen to wear them because a passing U.S. helicopter was sure to fire on a team dressed in black below without the slightest hesitation. We also knew that anyone of us caught by the enemy wearing black pajamas, and not an army uniform, was subject to immediate execution.

The VC leadership in Pleiku Province put a price on our heads. We laughed at the paltry bounty of 10,000 piasters, or \$50 at the black-market exchange rate equivalent, offered for a LRRP, dead or alive; but whenever civilians in the jungle spotted us, we made

a serious scramble to get out of the area before they could report our presence to the nearest village, and its VC commander.



Communist 'Dead or Alive' poster for a LRRP!

* * *

After my several missions, silently stalking the Communist political commissars and VC tax collectors, team leader SSG Cliff Popay picked me as a replacement for his patrol, "Hotel-2-Echo," as he was one man short. The next day, I was back in the jungle, walking point, and by chance passed very close to a major trail intersection. I heard voices in front and was ready to fire as soon as I could identify the target.

Two Montagnard women with rolls of brass bracelets on their wrists, and carrying baskets on their shoulders, appeared suddenly around the bend and I halted them with my CAR. Terrified, the younger one tried to hide her exposed breasts with a black cotton shawl.

The team surrounded the pair and we discussed what to do with them. Technically, with this encounter, our patrol was compromised and we should radio the Oasis for our extraction. However, Popay knew what the answer would be: helicopters are scarce; deal with the situation as you see fit, and continue with the mission.

If we let the women go, they would surely report the presence of our small five-man team when they returned to their village. The VC would find out and quickly deploy their forces to try to trap and catch us. With the loss of surprise, we would now be in very serious danger. I heard some members of the team suggesting knifing the two women silently. I protested forcefully. Popay ordered me to stay near the trail to provide security while the rest of the team took the prisoners to the top of a bluff.

I had serious misgivings; something terrible was about to happen.

Thirty minutes of nervous waiting and I couldn't take it any longer. I ran to rejoin my team members who were relaxing in the shade, telling jokes. Popay was laughing and playing with two brass bracelets. The young Montagnard girl was naked, sitting to the side, and looking very distraught. She was sobbing softly, and mechanically rubbing her arms over and over again, trying to remove little white streaks of caked-on dirt from her dark skin. Her clothed, older companion was trying to cover and console her.



TL "Hotel-2-Echo" SSG Popay with his "prisoner"

I was ashamed of my teammates. I mixed up a cold LRRP ration and carried the meal to the girl. She recoiled in fear... she thought I was about to rape her like the others!

The team saw my agitation and there was no more talk about killing the prisoners.

At the extraction LZ, on our way home, one of my own teammates purposely waved the muzzle of his CAR in my face and warned that I'd better keep my mouth shut about this!

SSG Popay's "Hotel-2-Echo" was not a good LRRP team to be on...

Back in camp, I never spoke another word to Popay. He was a leader I had looked up to, respected, trusted - but he had broken this trust. Decades later, I would still remember the young girl's face, and my lack of courage to stand up to Sgt. Popay to protect a defenseless civilian. Four strong men, armed, with painted faces had raped a helpless village girl – one after the other.

And I didn't do anything to stop it...

But I knew back then that we were often creating our own enemies in Vietnam. This was no way to win a war.

At the time, we all dealt with the daily senseless tragedies in Vietnam according to the accepted infantry saying... "it don't mean nothin' at all" ... to insulate us from the hurt and injustice.

** * **

Interspaced with the tragedies of war, the LRRPs occasionally also experienced random doses of grim comedy. In June, a well-meaning senior radio officer in the 4th Division's base camp selected the Second Brigade LRRPs to receive and evaluate the new classified "communications balloon." This new technical system consisted of a dirigible type helium-filled balloon to which a remote-operated PRC-25 radio was attached. The balloon was then tethered at five hundred feet altitude by a nylon rope and winch assembly.

The increased altitude was expected to increase the LRRP team's communications range significantly - promised our tech officer proudly. More importantly, this rig could eliminate the risk of having to send out our usual radio relay teams to support the more distant hazardous LRRP missions along the border.

In the jungle, the balloon rig performed beyond all expectations; we could even pull in the Army's rock-and-roll radio station in Saigon, hundreds of miles away - only problem was the seventeen-foot long giant plastic blimp that was connected to the nervous five-man LRRP team standing directly below -- perfectly visible to all the VC around them.

As it took over an hour to figure out how to reel in the huge balloon after its use, squeeze all the air from it, and then properly re-pack this contraption to fit back into its compact carrier - one of the impatient LRRPs, some claim it was Finch, somehow let go of the bitter end of the tether he was holding.

Up, up, and away it flew – taking our only radio with it...

No one in the Second Brigade LRRPs, however, 'fessed up to who was actually responsible for losing the 4th Division's prized sole prototype communications dirigible.

God knows, the balloon might still be up there, floating somewhere over Cambodia... broadcasting "Gooood Morning Vietnam!"

AVDDH-GC-4H

18 August 1968

SUBJECT: Operational Report - Lessons Learned (RCS CSFOR-65) for
Quarterly Period Ending 31 July 1968 (U)

(f) Communications Balloon: 2d Bde LRP's have been selected to receive and evaluate the communications balloon. The system consists of a 17 foot dirigible type helium-filled balloon to which is attached a remoted FRC-25 radio. The balloon is then tethered at 500 feet altitude by a nylon rope and winch assembly. The increased altitude is expected to increase the LRP communications range significantly.

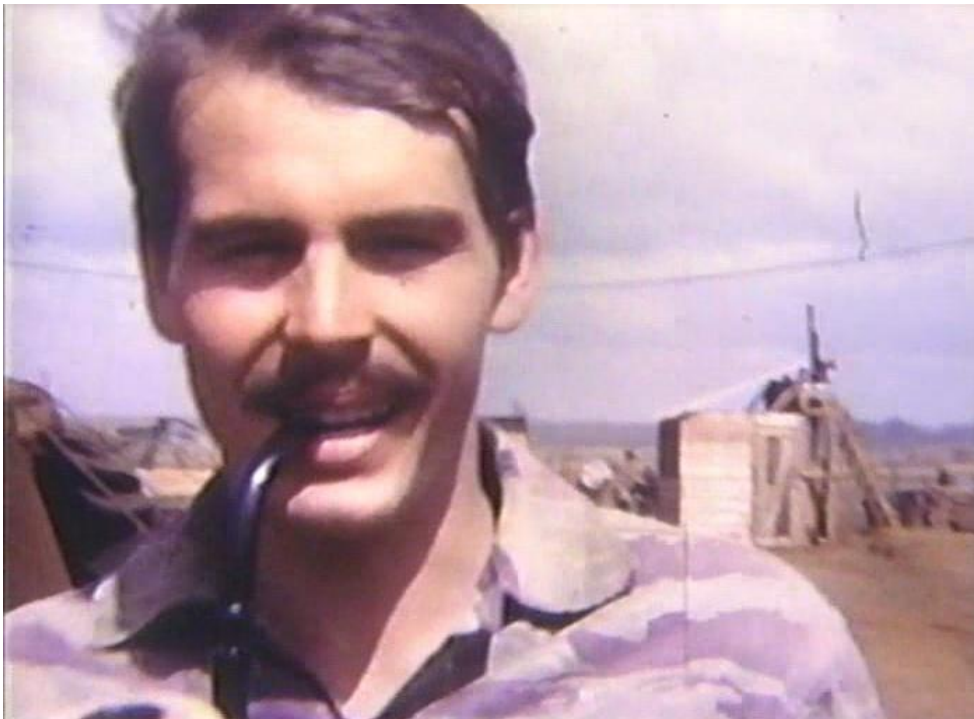


Finch, back in camp... Not Me !!

In early July 1968, I was designated by Cpt. Garnett to become a team leader myself. I was none too eager to accept such a serious responsibility over the lives of five men. However, one morning, Platoon Sergeant Blake just told me to get ready to go on an overflight of a suspected NVA arms storage area on the Ia Grai River, take photos and notes of stream crossing locations, and mark potential LZs on my map. I would then be taking a team out on my own the next day - to find this hidden enemy arms depot.

The LRRP teams in the field functioned without much regard to rank. It was experience, smarts, confidence, stress management, and the ability to deal with multiple issues all at the same time that counted. Each person's strengths, weaknesses, and motivations were brutally dissected amongst the team, and each person performed the job that he could do the best on patrol. When a major problem surfaced, we knew exactly who the leader was because everyone would look at him for the solution. He would find a way to get the team through a jam. I accepted the job as TL, but retained my point position, because for me, the leader of the patrol had to be up front. So, nothing really changed,

except when there was contact with the enemy. Then, I had to move quickly back to the radio to take full responsibility for the team.



LZ Oasis, promotion to LRRP Team Leader "Hotel-2-Foxtrot"

July 10, 1968; my watch read 0300 hours. My one-hour-long shift on guard duty had just ended. Pitch black and raining hard. LRRP team "Hotel-2-Foxtrot" was settled in for the night, hidden in an impenetrable jungle thicket about fifteen clicks (kilometers) from our firebase LZ Oasis, and the Cambodian border. The five of us had been inserted a week ago to search for one of the major NVA infiltration routes leading into Pleiku province, and its hidden arms caches, but we had not found a single trace of the enemy thus far. The only thing we encountered was difficult terrain, the monsoon rain, and the constant routine of marching slowly and carefully forward one step at a time. Yesterday, the Oasis again canceled our scheduled helicopter extraction because of the low cloud cover, and the mood of the team was getting tense.

Sitting up, leaning against a tree, I constantly adjusted my rubber poncho to keep the rain out, but water was seeping in just the same. I had been wet all day and hoped to dry out just a little during the night in my warm nylon poncho liner. I did not want to use my knife to form a contour in the ground to sleep more comfortably, because in this downpour, I

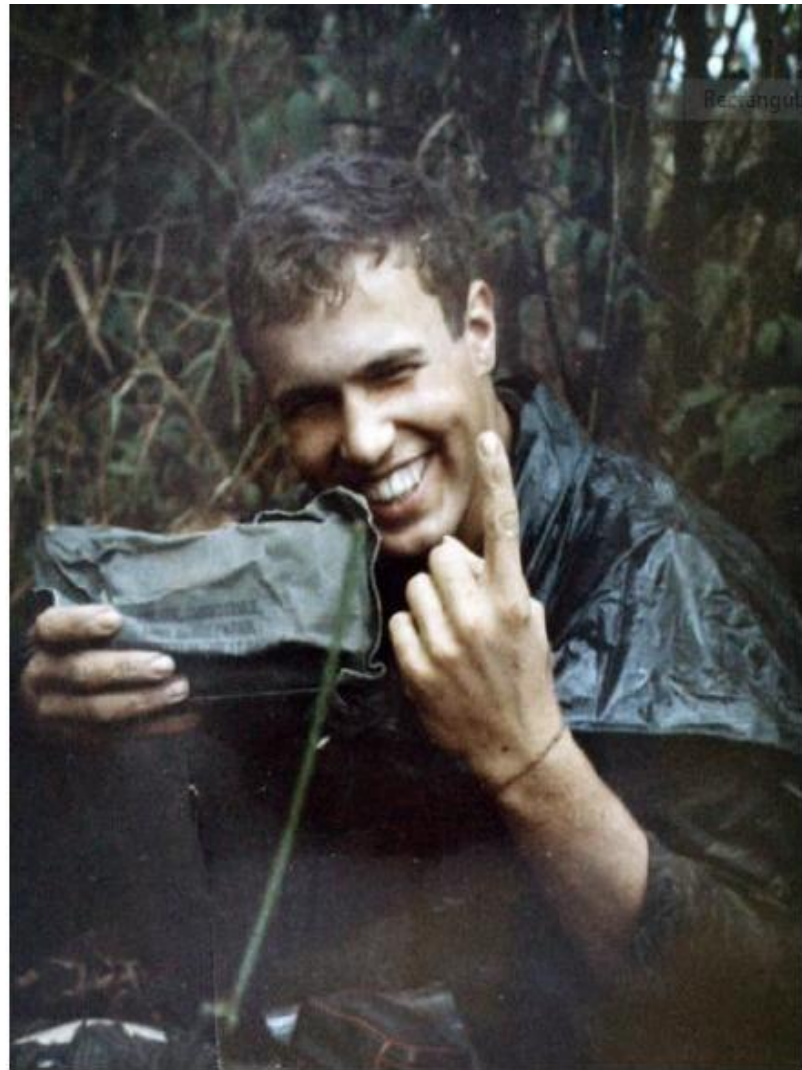
would be lying in a puddle. I slid my hand over my CAR-15 under the poncho, carefully checking if it was wet. I had carried this weapon 'round the clock for six months now and knew every shape and bump by feel. I could take it apart and assemble it in the dark. My trusty CAR reassured me, but still I could not fall asleep.

Six months in the LRRPs and this was my first mission as TL. Was I really ready for this job?... I asked myself in the dark.

** * **

As I sat thinking about tomorrow, my hand mechanically caressed a warm swelling on my inner thigh that continued to grow: a clump of leeches gorging on my blood. Soon they would drop all by themselves. If I pulled them off now the wound would bleed and become infected. I hated those tiny bastards that were everywhere in this wet jungle and attracted to the heat of our bodies. I groped around in my pack for the small handheld IR night vision scope to check on my four teammates spread out around me in a close circle in the dark. They were also sitting up, awake, and trying to keep dry. Thompson, the ATL, was on my right, rubbing his bandaged forearm. His mouth grimaced crookedly in a silent curse. A few missions before, an enemy grenade had wounded him, and tiny metal fragments were now popping up regularly from under his skin, making him very irritable.

Back in February, Cpt. Garnett, our CO, had accepted Thompson and me into the LRRPs on the same day. Thompson had joined the Army after high school in Alaska. He was then sent to communications school to become an RTO, but in the end, like me, volunteered for combat in the infantry in Vietnam. We often competed for the point position on the teams, because neither one of us wanted to carry that heavy "PRICK 25" radio set again.



After we had both graduated from the Special Forces' RECONDO School in Nha Trang, we stayed together on the same recon teams. For several months now, we had been working closely together on Sgt. Valeen's team "Hotel-2-Charlie." But since Valeen was returning shortly to the States PCS (permanent change of station), the TL position for "Hotel-2-Charlie" was becoming vacant. Several candidates were being vetted for this job, with me being tested first on team "Hotel-2-Foxtrot." Thompson was next in line.

Thompson was soft-spoken, and had a great sense of humor and good judgment. Just past nineteen, he was adept at quickly settling conflicts and differences among some of the older team members.

Thompson was my brother. The strong instinct to survive in Vietnam typically forced one to seek out a special and exclusive bond with another soldier – sometimes a newly-formed acquaintance or even a total stranger. Often, it quickly developed into a close personal and equal relationship of solid trust – like with a sibling, family member, or spouse. You looked out for your buddy with much greater care than given yourself, while he did the same for you. Two pairs of eyes, ears, and hands constantly working together to ensure your common survival was much better than being on your own. In the jungle, Thompson and I were melded into a single entity. I knew that Thompson would get me out of a jam, no matter what... and he knew for sure that I would do the same for him.

Looking through the IR scope, I scanned to Rob Soule, who was the newest member on the team and carried the hefty “PRICK” radio and spare batteries. To compensate for the extra weight, we had given him an M-79 grenade launcher with sawed off stock and shortened barrel to carry as a weapon. Known as “the Blooper,” from the sound it made, the 79 fired a beehive round of buckshot at close range, or a 40mm grenade that would arm itself after fifteen meters of flight and launch to a distance of up to four hundred meters. For a closer range, some of the LRRP sharpshooters would jam the stock into the ground and fire the weapon vertically at a slight angle towards the enemy, much like a mortar. The chopped 79 was a bit harder to fire after our unapproved modification to the barrel and stock, but was very compact, so it did not get in the way of the soldier carrying the bulky radio equipment. It was an effective and accurate weapon, universally feared by Charlie.



Next to Soule, sitting in the rain, was Lt. Hall, our XO and an Airborne Ranger, who was supposed to be based at the Oasis, but instead, preferred patrolling in the jungle with us as often as he could to get away from his lonesome command bunker. Lt. Hall was a very deliberate and careful operational planner. He had infinite patience and often tempered some of the quick decisions made by the team. I was glad that he was with us. Lt. Hall was here to evaluate my performance as the new team leader of "Hotel-2-Foxtrot."

Lastly, the IR scope illuminated Flores on my left. In the hazy green glow, I saw that Arty was sitting up, half covered by his poncho, eyes wide open and completely ignoring the rain.

Before being drafted into the Army, Flores was a professional boxer in California, just starting out in his career. He had a quick temper and an even quicker punch, and not much regard for any authority. Flores was a natural fighter and always looked for some trouble, especially with Charlie. On an earlier mission, on Sgt. Terry Johnson's team, he had killed one with his massive Bowie knife. Just slit his throat with it. A great asset to any team. Now, it looked like Flores was meeting up with the rain like some old opponent in a long-fought boxing match. Tough son of a bitch, I muttered to myself, regretting the silent railing about my own misery.



Arty Flores

The night dragged on. I looked at my watch every fifteen minutes. Maybe this would help the dawn come faster. Impatient for that sunshine. How could this jungle be so cold?

Daylight finally! But there was no sun, the rain was blocking it out. We radioed the Oasis for instructions on our extraction. The mission was over and we wanted to come in.

No helicopters again, the clouds were too low. We were told to move towards a dirt road that joined Highway 19, running from the Cambodian border to Pleiku. A way would be found to extract us later. We looked at the map, planned a route, rolled up our ponchos, and recovered the Claymores set up around our night position for defense. No time for breakfast, it was too wet.

I picked up my pack and took the point. The sixty-pound load warmed me up quickly as the morning rain drenched us to the bone again. It was covering up the sounds of our movement, though, and we stepped out quickly. Charlie was probably still asleep in his dry hootch.

Mid-morning. We ran into a network of fresh trails. First sign of any people in five days. Skirting carefully along the side of the main trail, we reached a clearing that revealed on one side a large square bamboo hut without walls, camouflaged by a few tall trees.

There were no agricultural fields nearby. It looked like an enemy transport way station, given the number of empty baskets stacked up on the raised floor.

We watched and listened, concealed by the foliage. No one else was here. We approached slowly and carefully dug around. My suspicions were confirmed when I found a U.S. hand grenade hidden under a mat.

The arms cache had to be hidden somewhere nearby.

We discussed ways of booby-trapping the hootch with the same grenade but Lt. Hall pointed out that such an action must first be coordinated and recorded with the brigade. No time for such a complicated procedure. I slipped the grenade into my pack. Couldn't leave it with Charlie.

As the main trail descended southwest, the jungle thinned out gradually. We reached a narrow grassy plain. A small river with steep banks blocked our way. On the other side, the plain continued about fifty meters to a wood line where the dense forest backed up a steep slope. We had to cross this open field and the river to gain the cover of the opposite tree line.



Crossing to the arms cache



Lt. Hall

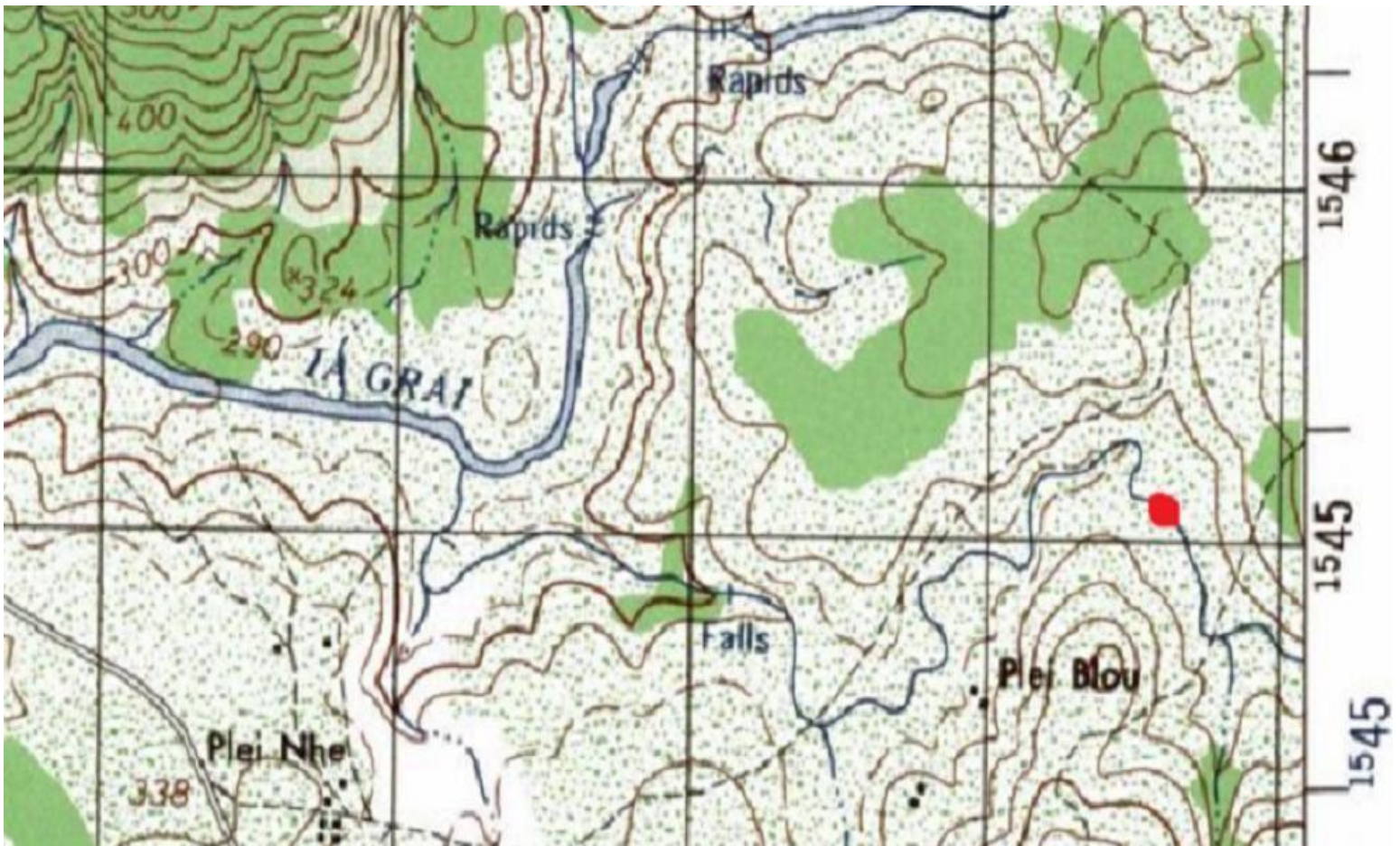
I chose a submerged log spanning the river and quickly waded to the other side, hiding in the tall grass under the bank. Thompson and Soule crossed next and provided cover from the top of the bank. Lt. Hall came after them, with Flores following last.

Stepping backward in the tall grass while covering the crossing with my CAR, my foot broke through loose soil shifted by the rain and I stumbled into a deep hole carved into the bank. It was man-made! I was sitting on top of foot-long olive drab carton tubes with Chinese writing on them. Hundreds of them. I did not touch them. They looked like enemy rifle grenades. From above, Thompson reported that there was a trail leading from the river fifty meters to the wood line and up a ridge back into the dense jungle.



"Call for the choppers... Let's 'EOD' the damn pile and get the hell out of here..." he proposed impatiently, pulling a packet of C-4 explosives with fuze and blasting cap from his rucksack. Thompson was ready to blow the arms cache, while I was plotting its location on my map.

We were now operating in 1,000-meter grid square No. YA9645. I radioed the coordinates of the cache to the Oasis -- "966452."



In the meantime, Lt. Hall sent Thompson, Flores, and Soule to the tree line to set up a defensive position securing the trail, while I remained at the cache to examine its full contents. We stacked a large pile of the OD tubes on top of the bank, but there were plenty more in that cave. The size of the find overcame our natural caution about booby traps. Lt. Hall was in the hole passing up the tubes. I was on top of the bank sorting the pile.

Sudden bursts of automatic fire from the trail at the wood line! They sounded like our CAR-15s.

Automatically throwing on my pack, I left Lt. Hall with the tubes below, and sprinted the fifty meters to quickly join the team which had the radio. Incoming rounds sliced through the wet leaves just over my head.

Whsheet... Whsheet... Whsheet...

Startled, I low-crawled the remaining fifteen meters, heavy pack still on my back. The gunfire stopped.

Thompson was already on the radio with the Oasis, reporting the contact. A squad of NVA soldiers had come down the trail towards the river, and the hasty ambush set up by the team had driven them back up the ridge. Thompson passed me the handset as I was nervously recalculating our new position on the map. In the rain, I had marked a dot with my pen on the plastic cover, just over the river crossing where we had found those grenades, and put my transparent plastic protractor on it to measure the coordinates to the right and then up - for our reckoned position plot on the grid square. We had to be accurate within ten meters of the team's location to call in close artillery fire support. The slightest mistake, and we could all end up dead from our own artillery strike.

I mumbled the eight digits to Thompson... 96154505... and then made a second reading to be sure - and transmitted the number again to the Oasis.

I asked the Oasis for artillery support. It was raining hard once more. Radio contact with the Oasis faded out. Shit!

I pulled out my SOI. Where was the other nearest 155mm artillery support unit?

Fourteen kilometers away... just barely in range. Shit! Dialed up their frequency. They answered! Thank God!

New calculations, grid coordinates, my location... YA96154505. Azimuth and distance to target. I wanted to put those rounds quickly between our team at the tree line by the river and the ridge up which the NVA had fled.

"Fire Mission! First round smoke!" I called into the radio - to register the first impact on the ground, and to give me a visual reference from the smoke where to start placing the next artillery rounds.

Blaaam!... It crashed high on the ridge above us. Had to walk it down quickly now with high explosives rounds.

"Down thirty meters! Fire one round HE," I yelled into the handset... The high explosives round weighed more than the smoke, so I needed to see exactly where it landed before calling in more HE fire for effect on the enemy. I had to think about the safety of the team first.

The radio went dead. Damn! Damn! The artillery support unit would not respond.

Quickly, I tried calling the Oasis again. Got their frequency. Only static.

It was the damn handset, shorting out in the rain!

I jiggled it back and forth. Finally, radio contact again.

Oasis came in loud and clear. The voice on the other end sounded highly concerned.

Where the hell are you?

"Quick! Fire Mission!" I cried out.

"Say location..."

"961...?" I had completely forgotten the eight-digit number of our position, and the red dot of my previous plot was already washed off the map. The plastic cover on my map was fogging up; I couldn't read the coordinates with my protractor.

Damn rain. Couldn't hear anything either in this downpour. Handset was cutting out once more.

Shit! Opened my pack. Screwing the back-up handset cord terminal into the radio, my fingers were shaking.

"Say location... say location," the shrill voice from the handset demanded persistently.

I tore the plastic cover off the map to read the coordinates better, but the heavy rain instantly turned the paper into a coagulated mess that was falling apart in my hands.

"Say location!" The PRICK cackled again. I was in a panic, trying to think what to say.

"Karta mokraya. Ne mogu pročitat," I heard myself yelling back in Russian from somewhere far off - my map is wet, I can't read it. The stress of trying to find my words involuntarily pushed me back into my native language.

Radio Oasis suddenly went silent... Were they thinking that the enemy had already overrun us?

Suddenly, there was movement on the trail directly in front of us. Thompson fired his CAR inches from my left ear. I was deafened. Was that initial smoke round forcing the enemy down from the ridge? Were they trying to charge us to escape the expected placement of our next artillery rounds on them?

The four of us were in a close semi-circle, facing the enemy at the wood line and ridge, packs in front for protection. Our backs were against the open field and river.

We were trapped!

Movement in the brush very close in front of me! Heavy rain poured down; I couldn't see what it was. I dropped the handset and radio. Where was my CAR! Pack was open. I automatically picked up a hand grenade that was on top and pulled the pin.

Throwing...

Instinct said don't throw, it was that enemy grenade I had found earlier. Had it been short-fused by the VC to work as a booby trap? Maybe it would explode in my hand?

Too late, it was already sailing into the underbrush. It hit a tree. Bounced. Shit! Rolling back towards us! The grenade was going to explode just next to us!

"Grenade!" I yelled to warn the team as the blast went just over our heads protected by the packs. I sensed the impact of thousands of tiny metal fragments peppering the trees around us in a forceful whistling gust.

Short bursts of automatic fire very close and very loud. I couldn't tell what was incoming or outgoing fire anymore.

So loud...

Gunfire stopped. The radio was working again and I reported the contact to the Oasis. I must not have been very calm, as the voice on the other end focused me on providing location, distance to the enemy, numbers, and compass azimuths. I grabbed Thompson's map, took a deep breath, and concentrated on the requirements...

Lt. Hall was here. He had brought an armful of those Chicom rifle grenades and we dumped them together with my LAW behind us. He set up to the right of Soule and I passed him the handset. The Oasis had sent Cpt. Garnett in his bubble (Bell-47 light observation helicopter) as well as two gunships to support us, and we could already hear their rotors angrily whipping up the air in the distance, making their way towards us.

The big helicopters arrived quickly on station, ready to strafe with their miniguns, 7.62mm Gatling machine guns with six barrels, each one firing 4,000 RPM. They wanted to confirm our position. Right hand fumbling, I mechanically reached behind me to unfasten a smoke grenade from my web harness, pulled the pin, and dropped it directly in front of us to signal the birds where we were hiding in the jungle.

A cloud of red smoke seeped out slowly around us and up through the cover of the jungle trees.

Damn! I had thrown the wrong grenade! Green was for marking our position, red was for the enemy's!

Lt. Hall, his body tensed up, was on the radio with the choppers:

"My location is red smoke, repeat, my location red smoke. Enemy target is zero-one-three degrees from red, repeat, target is zero-one-three degrees from red. Distance to target twenty meters, repeat, twenty meters. NVA squad with light weapons..." He cried out insistently.

After reconfirming the enemy position and distance from our red smoke for the gunships one more time, Lt. Hall dropped the handset into his lap, as we all anxiously watched the helicopters swinging around in a tight arc, heading unerringly towards our red smoke. The gunships would strafe closely around us and continue along the tree line, parallel to the river. They were coming in quick and low.

A thousand chainsaws roared! The two ships were side-by-side, spewing out fire from their miniguns just one hundred meters to the left of us. The thunder was deafening. I dove face first into the ground, as a green dust cloud was whirling to overwhelm us. Leaves shredded by thousands of bullets. They were going to kill us for sure!



Hundreds of hot empty casings from above were falling everywhere around me. Each one bouncing off me felt like a real bullet. My lungs pounded from the impact of the helicopter minigun strike as the soil churned up on both sides of us just meters away. Absolute terror. This is the end!

In an instant, the gunships separated, leaving us untouched in the center as they continued to devastate the tree line along the river. It was over in less than ten seconds. We were alive.

The gunships banked sharply to the left into the ridge and came around for another attack on the wood line, almost perpendicular to the red smoke and the river in front. The first ship fired. A rocket exploded right where we had the last contact with the NVA. A blanket of heat scorched over me, sucking all the air out of my lungs.

Damn that was close!

The second gunship followed low and was almost on top of us. He was going to fire! Thompson was sitting up next to me watching it coming in. I yelled to him. Down!

Diving under my pack, I heard Lt. Hall calling stridently into the radio:

"Check fire! Check fire...!"

A huge bright and fiery fist slammed my pack backwards into me while a second hard concussion from behind tossed me up into the air like a helpless doll.

Silence. Total relief. It had finally happened! All the constant anxiety and fear waiting for the unknown to arrive, and now it was actually here. It was all over and I didn't have to worry about it anymore. The fear was totally gone now.

All bright... warm, inside. Falling softly somewhere, in a place that was very quiet. Relaxed... So, this is what it's like to let go of life... not so bad after all.

Calm. Letting it all go. Curious. What would happen next?

Blacking out... slammed to the ground. Couldn't move. Deaf; ears ringing. Lungs burning, couldn't breathe. Numb. Acrid stink of explosives. Couldn't see anything. There was dense smoke on the ground, even the wet grass was burning.

I heard muffled cries of pain.

I wasn't dead?! Couldn't be. Get up! Get up! You've got to stand up now.

I stood up. The only one up. Felt head, arms, stomach, legs. I wasn't hit!

Shaking.

Just me standing all alone in the smoke... shaking... shaking... I'm O.K. I'm O.K...

Confused... What should I do now - focus on the enemy advancing on our position? Look for my other teammates? Check again for my own wounds to make sure if I'm really alive?

Cries of pain again, but not as loud. Smoke drifting away...

To the right, Soule was sitting up holding his elbow and rocking back and forth. The bone was shattered and blood was spurting a foot into the air. Soule's eyes told me that he was already going into shock.

"Stop shooting; stop shooting..." he repeated quietly.

Couldn't think straight. Automatically reached for the medical kit all team members carried in the same side pocket. Mumbled to myself... clear the airway... stop the bleeding... treat shock... Countless hours of repetitive first aid training took over as hands mechanically worked tourniquet, pressure dressings, blood expander serum tubing. It was over in minutes; the bleeding had stopped. But I was drenched in Soule's warm blood that was saturating my tiger-striped fatigues with the sour aroma of copper.

There was so much blood...

The smoke was dispersing. I saw a jungle boot on the ground, empty, still laced all the way up. How could this be? It was Thompson's!

His leg was naked from the thigh down. All white, thin, and strangely distorted. Limp like a rag, like there was no bone left inside. No blood anywhere, but I could smell that terrible sweet scent of burning flesh. No other wounds. I looked at Thompson; he was conscious and trying to say something. But there was no sound coming from his lips. His eyes were like hooks holding on to me. He was trying to say something to me, but I couldn't understand. I tried to reassure him:

"You'll be O.K! It's just your leg, only your leg. You'll be O.K."...

I bandaged the leg, but didn't know what else I could do. Inside, I felt that something was terribly wrong.

Close by, Flores was convulsing and slowly coming to on the ground; the concussion had knocked him out. Blood was trickling from his nose and ears, and his gaping mouth was wheezing for air. I yelled out if he was O.K., but he couldn't understand what I was saying.

On the other side of Soule, Lt. Hall was sitting up holding his leg and talking rapidly into the radio. I looked at his foot. A metal fragment had passed completely through his ankle, leaving gaping holes on both sides of his canvas jungle boot. A pool of blood was seeping out of it, already turning black in the warm air. I bandaged the wound and gave his leg a shot of morphine.

We had taken a direct hit from the gunship's rocket. It exploded directly in front of us and the pack I was using for shelter was shredded. The Claymore and other gear inside had deflected the shrapnel away from my head. By a miracle, the mine in my pack somehow did not blast off. But the LAW rocket and the Chicom rifle grenades stacked behind us were all gone, detonated in a secondary explosion.

Cpt. Garnett landed by the river in his little bubble, and Flores and I, still in shock from the blast of the rocket, were stumbling and slowly dragging Soule to him. Strapped him in next to the pilot.



We ran with Thompson. He was heavy and it was far across the field. That terrible scent of charred flesh again.

Couldn't throw up now - had to run!

We must make it quickly to the Dustoff again or the helicopter would surely leave!

We strapped Thompson in on the other side of Soule. I looked up into Thompson's eyes and they had that same strange look. Hooks grabbing onto me. They were desperately pleading...

"Don't leave me... You can't leave now..."

Thompson was trying to say something, but no words were coming from his mouth. Mouth slack and open, lips twitching. His head rolled over to the side. There was a small dark hole in the base of his skull! I could see deep inside.

Nooo!! The helicopter lifted off.

Wait! Stop! Have to put a bandage on!

Too late, he was already high in the air. I sat on the ground gasping for breath.

Cpt. Garnett appeared, .45 in hand, looking at me as if waiting for instructions. Relief. Glad that he was here. Somehow, I thought that he had left, but he had given up his seat on the bubble for the wounded and was now on the ground with us. Cpt. Garnett was concerned that the NVA could attack again.

Shit... since the explosion and the wounded, I had forgotten completely about the enemy! The enemy was no longer a priority for me – it was only the team that counted first.

We quickly formed a defensive position. Cpt. Garnett picked up Soule's chopped 79, giving it an odd look. He didn't say anything - I hoped he wasn't thinking about destruction of U.S. Government property! I pointed in the direction of the trail leading up from the river into the jungle where we would face the enemy until the birds returned to pull us out.

The bubble came back for Lt. Hall. The rest of us were extracted to Pleiku by medevac without incident. On the way, with my face pressed hard to the cold metal deck of the helicopter, eyes closed, exhausted, I tried to relive what had happened just forty minutes before.



My first mission as TL, and "Hotel-2-Foxtrot" was no more. I didn't fire a single shot. I didn't even see the enemy. I was the only one of my team left standing...

** * **

The battalion commander was waiting for me at the LZ. He had helicopters ready to return to the site with troops and examine the cache. The colonel looked at my tigers, ripped, stiff with the stains of dried blood, and kept asking me:

"Soldier, are you sure you're not hurt? Are you really sure..." Mechanically, I checked all over again. Hands passing over my stiff fatigues. No. It was just Soule's caked-on blood.

We flew directly to the log crossing and easily found the pile of enemy rifle grenades still sitting on the riverbank. After some discussion, the helicopters landed some distance away and the troops gingerly searched the area. No one touched anything, especially that pile we had made on the side of the stream. The troops found a series of other weapons caches along the same riverbank.

I walked back alone to the site of our contact. Devastation. The ground was plowed up by the gunship miniguns: thousands of empty casings, large chunks of metal fragments sticking up, burnt grass, bits of our gear. Black oval patches of blood in the soil. It stank. All the bark and leaves of surrounding bushes and trees had been blown clean from their trunks from the ground up. How the hell did we survive this?

I started walking up the trail near the tree line where the NVA had been. Maybe we got some of them. But the colonel called me back; the choppers were ready to lift off.

Back at the Oasis I didn't talk to anyone. I went straight to my tent, put on headphones, and turned the music up very loud to drown out any thoughts, and to let the numbness take over. Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence" record played over and over again...

*Hello darkness my old friend... I've come to talk with you
again...*

In restless dreams I walked alone... And no one dared... Disturb the sound of silence...

The same awful feeling washing over me – like an endless succession of restless waves constantly lapping up on the beach, one following the other.

I have failed my brother... I have failed my brother... I have failed my brother...

* * *



Back at the Oasis – Rucksack blown away – but not a scratch on me!

On July 12, 1968, a visit to the wounded team at the hospital in Pleiku was organized for the unit that morning. I couldn't go. They were all wounded, and I was not.

Guilt.

Would they blame me? Should we have split the team up along a known enemy trail and left it in a vulnerable position? Did the gunships confuse our position for the enemy's because of my red smoke? Did I treat Thompson's wounds correctly? Did I make a mistake?



Quintero

Cope

Finch

Johnson

Tex

Mayle

71st Evac Hosp

Thompson was dead by the afternoon.

Why was he dead and I alive? The shrapnel had torn through my pack and hit him. We should both be dead. As his closest teammate, I was asked to go through his personal effects, next to my bunk, to separate what could be sent to his folks. This was very hard and I declined. I couldn't touch the belongings that he had held only a short while ago in his own hands when he was still alive.

Platoon sergeant Blake showed up later in my tent, nervously waving a sheet of paper in his hand. He wanted me to sign it. A recommendation for a medal of valor for Cpt. Garnett, Blake shrugged apologetically. The captain was leaving PCS shortly and an award would help advance his military career. I glanced at the paper without reading what was written on it, and mechanically signed at the bottom.

In Vietnam, it was understood that officers needed these kinds of things.

July 19, 1968, I received orders to escort Thompson's remains home to Ward Cove, Alaska and be present at the military funeral. Days later, I was in the Oakland airport, in uniform, waiting for a commercial flight up north. Two burly MPs guided me persuasively to the nearest restroom in the terminal. My unauthorized black Ranger beret with the LRRP patch had their attention. They wanted to see orders for my Recondo insignia and Combat Infantryman Badge too. Take them! I ripped off the CIB and threw it on the floor. Shaking with rage, I measured the distance to strike the MP nearest to me. But they saw my escort orders and quickly backed off without saying another word. Alone, I picked up my CIB and tried to calm down, hands shaking. Thompson's blurred reflection stared back at me dimly from the mirror.

The funeral was held with full military honors. I thought back to a conversation some weeks before where Thompson had a premonition of being killed. He had several close calls on his last patrols and felt that his luck was running out. But he continued to volunteer for missions. The job was important, and he had to be with his teammates.

Thompson specifically asked me then:

"Poz, I'm not going to make it out of here. I know it for sure. If I'm killed... make sure there's no formal wake for me. Just something simple with my friends. Promise me?"

He did not want to be the center of some official ritual attended by casual spectators who had no idea why he had to keep going out on those missions. To him, this was a very private commitment, not to be shared with outsiders. And here I was, endorsing a formal public ceremony and failing to fulfill his final wish.

I folded the flag slowly in that tight triangle along Thompson's coffin – thirteen times, with the four white stars showing uppermost at last. I closed my eyes, and let my tears flow freely to block out seeing all the strangers standing nearby. I imagined that Thompson's teammates from the Oasis were all around him instead.

Goodbye old friend.

* * *

Returning to the Oasis after the funeral, I found out that the LRRPs were charged with a new mission against the enemy threat - closer to the Cambodian border. At that time, the 1st NVA Division had moved clandestinely from the Kontum area to plan a surprise attack on the city of Ban Mê Thuôt, further to the south. By mid-August, the enemy had finished its final reconnaissance of the target city, with the 66th NVA Regiment deployed to the north, the 320th to the west, and the 95th Regt. to the south - ready for the big assault. With intelligence provided by our LRRP patrols, and captured prisoners, the 4th Division moved swift reinforcements to Ban Mê Thuôt, including the Second Brigade LRRPs. Just in time, this stopped the NVA's planned attack on the city, forcing the enemy to switch objectives. The NVA forces could engage only in small skirmishes and ambushes from now on, as the element of surprise was lost for them.



On the move to Ban Mê Thuôt

Our CO, Cpt. Garnett, was gone, replaced by a new officer we immediately baptized "Cpt. Gooney" because it matched both his actual name and cavalier aloof attitude. Gooney sported a close-cut "gung-ho" haircut, spit-shined jungle boots, wore a pressed uniform with lots of Special Forces patches, badges, French airborne wings, little colored ribbons...



Our new CO "Cpt. Gooney"



Airborne Ranger - Special Forces - French Para-Commando - parading around camp in spit-shined jungle boots

Thirty years old, arrogant, intense, fit-looking, he was an Airborne Ranger, bragging that he had served a previous tour in 'Nam leading a Special Forces A team. He was brash, confident, knew everything, and treated his subordinates like dull schoolboys. When briefing me about my next mission in the jungle, Gooney looked through me like glass, rattled off his orders, and then mechanically dismissed me.

"Better get a haircut too, soldier!" He demanded in parting as I stepped out of his command bunker.

Clearly this was someone who was not close to his men, or had much interest in taking care of them. No one in the Second Brigade LRRPs was going to follow this man anywhere...

The new CO was quickly becoming a real albatross for the LRRPs. Gooney did not meet with his team leaders. Instead, he would spend all day in his bunker moving little colored flags around on the map. He was a strategist. The team leaders felt that he was taking shortcuts that were putting our teams in peril.

Being absent from the unit on escort duty and a stint in the hospital battling malaria, I missed my promotion cycle to sergeant. But, I knew that there were other reasons for my stay in rank. I was a smart-ass recent college-kid, unwillingly turned into an U.S. Army private, who did not pay much attention to the organization's rigid class structure where rank was everything. Instinctively, I attached myself to people with the right military skills, judgment, and leadership abilities, regardless of rank – to stay alive. The rest I avoided or ignored completely because it could put me in harm's way. Rank, often, had nothing to do with competence - or leadership. I was not afraid to question my seniors about a command that did not make any sense. I recognized a person for what he was, and not automatically by the insignia of rank that he wore on his uniform. But the U.S. Army ferociously suppressed such rebel sentiment.

Furthermore, I had no time for the officers at base camp because they contributed nothing to my survival. But it was those people in the rear who decided on promotions... who they saw to be best suited for command.

The main reason, though, why I really wanted those stripes was to have fewer hassles in base camp for wearing my unauthorized moustache. Only NCOs were entitled to have them in Vietnam, and it bothered me that someone with a little rank would repeatedly order me to shave mine off. So, I just grew a new one each time.

What were they going to do... send me to Vietnam?

No matter; I was still team leader of "Hotel-2-Foxtrot," and some of the newly appointed sergeants were now serving on my team. In the jungle, rank had no meaning.

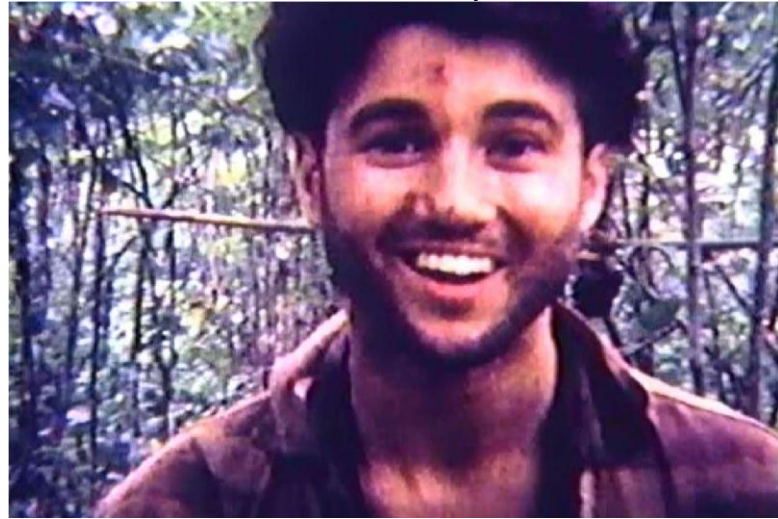
Cpt. Gooney assigned me a new mission to search for an enemy base camp hidden deep in the jungle, on the Cambodian border, that had been attacked by our Air Force jets just the night before. The next day, I was on point, and we found the enemy camp. We

discovered dozens of bunkers and dugout fighting positions, trenches, a first aid station, and kitchens - all abandoned and soaking in the rain. It looked like the NVA had fled in a panic after the strike, with just their personal weapons in hand, leaving their wet uniforms behind drying on branches. Rations and ammunition were left stacked inside their bunkers. Uneaten food was fresh in the mess kits. We explored the empty camp with great caution, expecting the NVA - naked, cold, wet, hungry, and very furious - to return at any time to reclaim their gear. There could be hundreds of them hiding in the bushes nearby.

On Point looking for the NVA camp



Teammate Cope



Food is still fresh in the mess kits





Gooney was delighted with the find and instructed the team to wait for reinforcements - he was arranging a platoon of infantry soldiers from the Second Brigade to be flown in to secure the site and collect the enemy materiel. Once they arrived, our team was to follow the NVA tracks from the camp, and find their new location.

The infantry platoon was dropped in right on target and started sweeping the area. The grunts were nervous about the size of the enemy camp and the prospect of having to set up a night ambush there in the event the NVA came back. We were equally nervous about having to follow a trail of discarded web gear, canteens, and hats from the retreating NVA. The LRRPs performed best when surprise was on their side, and the enemy was not aware of their presence. Gooney's orders to pursue the panicky NVA put our team in danger.

We didn't follow the enemy trail directly, but skirted along it widely. The jungle was very thick and our movement slow, but we were well concealed. The next day, we heard wood chopping and smelled campfires. The NVA were very close. Gooney's new orders were to find a trail and set up an ambush. There were no LZs nearby for an emergency extraction, so we disregarded our orders, and moved cautiously away from any direct confrontation with the enemy forces. We pinned down their exact location and shadowed them until our scheduled uneventful lift-off several days later. We had no confidence that if we got into a jam, Gooney would know how to bail us out, or even attempt to help us.

* * *

September 6, 1968. Returning from the mission in the abandoned NVA base camp, my friend Sgt. Yasui met me at the helicopter pad with distressing news. LRRPs Dennis Ahrendsen and Joseph Kull of new team "Hotel-2-Charlie" had both been killed in action on patrol the day before. Yasui was distraught; a single enemy soldier who had managed to surprise the resting team during a meal break, and fire from only five meters away, had killed them both with a single burst from his AK. Two other LRRPs were wounded in the same attack. Kull and Ahrendsen were new in the unit and had not yet been fully trained and vetted by an experienced team leader. The skill of the attack pointed to the NVA's use of special anti-LRRP recon hunting teams that our colleagues in Special Forces had been warning us about.

At the memorial service in the base camp, our Brigade officers pinned two Bronze Stars on their empty hats. Yasui lamented that Gooney was sending unprepared teams into dangerous areas.



October 21, 1968, it was past midnight when our platoon sergeant Blake woke us up at Ban Mê Thuôt base. Team "Hotel-2-Hotel" was in big trouble. It was being extracted under enemy fire at night, the most difficult and dangerous situation for LRRPs to be in. We rushed to the Tactical Operations Center (TOC) bunker where the radio from the extraction chopper in the air stuttered the news that the team had just been picked up and was on its way home. We sighed in relief, and casually headed towards the pad, anxious to meet up with our teammates and listen to their story. A night extraction under hostile fire was always a breathtaking topic to discuss. Especially right after it had happened.



Finley getting the news that he was promoted to team leader "Hotel-2-Hotel" - MIA / captured seven days later

The ship landed on the pad with a worn-out groan, its rotors slowly whining to a reluctant halt. Three LRRPs, with terrified and exhausted expressions on their faces, slid off the deck dragging their heavy packs behind them. SP/4 Hancock, PFC Hamby, and PFC Pisarcik. They were the "newbies" who had recently joined the platoon and were still in training, learning about small recon patrol operations.

No one else was following them!

But where were team leader PFC Finley and his assistant SP/4 Ghahate? We collared the pilot and a confused exchange of shouts began in the dark as we tried to sort out what had happened:

The team was surrounded by the enemy on the ground, engaged in a major shootout in the dark jungle. Finley was on the radio with our TOC in Ban Mê Thuột calling in artillery fire as well as for an extraction. The TOC provided the team's location to the extraction chopper which found the team and hovered over them while one of the door gunners fired his M-60 at the enemy muzzle flashes surrounding the team. Finley ordered the three new LRRPs to board first, and then pushed Ghahate up on the skid, while providing the last covering fire from the ground below. He then tossed his CAR hard on the deck - the weapon fired with the bullet smashing its way through the cockpit almost hitting the door gunner.

The helicopter took off abruptly... while Finley was still trying to grab on to the skid.

We directed a chorus of angry shouts at the pilot and his crew:

"Where the hell are Finley and Ghahate?!"

The pilot yelled back that it was pitch black, and the other LRRPs on the ship had signaled him that everyone was on board - so he took off! He did not know that team leader Finley was left behind on the ground, or that Ghahate, who was carrying the heavy radio, could not climb aboard unassisted from the skid. The door gunner saw him falling off at a hundred feet as the helicopter was rising. The three shocked new LRRPs could not even remember anything that had happened in the chaos of the enemy contact and extraction in the dark.

We all rushed to our tents, frantically getting our gear together. We must go back now to get them out of there! But Gooney cut us short: it would be safer at daybreak - he ordered. Three teams on high edge, and in full gear, waited on the pad until first light when the choppers finally took off. Near the LZ, one team found Ghahate's body lying face down on the ground, the pale soles of his naked feet showing pitifully through the green grass. The VC had taken his weapon, web gear, rucksack with the radio - and his jungle boots.

One of the LRRPs kneeled down to turn him over. Stop!... screamed Sgt. Yasui.

He pushed the LRRP aside and gingerly passed his hand under Ghahate's body systematically along one side and then the other, pulling out two hand grenades from underneath that had their pins removed. They had belonged to Ghahate and were used by the VC to booby-trap his corpse.

A strobe light was also found, tied to a tree branch, ostensibly by the VC, to try to lure in a rescue chopper later during that night.

We looked and looked, but found no signs of Private First Class Dickey Finley.

Fifty years later, he still remains listed as MIA by the U.S. Army.

At the 4th Division's formal inquiry, in late November 1968, the door gunner claimed that one of the recon members had told the pilot to take off. The three surviving LRRPs, Hamby, Pisarcik and Hancock, recounted what had happened to the Board of Inquiry:

As the helicopter was rising, Pisarcik yelled to Hamby, "Where's the other two guys?"

Hamby looked over the side, and saw a person hanging from the skid. He shouted back, "Finley's on the skid!"

Pisarcik looked over, but saw nothing but tree tops and darkness whirling by.

"You've left two people back there!" He screamed at the pilot.

At the same time, the door gunner reported that a man had fallen off the skid.

The helicopter circled back and landed, with the three LRRPs jumping off to frantically look for their lost teammates in the dark. But it was the wrong spot, covered by high grass!

They re-boarded the helicopter yelling at the pilot:

"This is the wrong field!"

The pilot circled the woods again, but it was pitch black below. Without any ground markers, they could not find the first LZ. The helicopter returned to Ban Mê Thuôt without the two missing men. They were left behind, all alone in the jungle at night, no weapons or radio, with the enemy surrounding them...

Surviving LRRP SP/4 Hancock would shortly be killed himself on another mission in Kontum, on February 2, 1969, together with three of his Second Brigade teammates.

** * **

With no time to overcome the shock of our losses, the Second Brigade LRRPs moved again, to another firebase in Kontum, an area of operation closer to the border of Laos. My next missions continued to deteriorate under Gooney's command. Our team was mortared by our own forces, and then fired upon by friendly machine guns as Gooney instructed us to join up with an infantry unit that was set up in a defensive position. His radio coordination with the friendly unit had failed.

On another patrol, near a sparse hilltop, "Hotel-2-Foxtrot" was inadvertently surprised by a passing helicopter. The chopper was banking lazily towards us to take a closer look. Should we hide, or quickly show that we were friendlies?

Shit! Too late; one of the door gunners was already tracking his M-60 weapon on us.

Brrrrttt... balls of tracers flashed brightly at us. I was in a total panic. He was sure to hit our team with the next burst!

If the pilot had followed normal procedures and radioed the TOC, he would have been briefed that a LRRP team was down below. This one, however, fired blindly at anything that moved on the ground. I was not about to run into the open, flashing my orange signal panel at the chopper, while our RTO was desperately trying to find the right frequency to call in for a check fire.

The second burst from the door gunner was kicking up dirt in our faces and I was shaking with rage. I was going to shoot that stupid door gunner!

I raised the scope of my sniper rifle towards the slowly circling bird, looking for his large white flight helmet in my crosshairs, but my excited teammates pushed the barrel aside as we quickly scrambled down the hill where the tall rocks would protect us.



My confidence in the LRRPs' support structure, artillery, and helicopters was completely shattered. I didn't trust my own forces anymore. After making it through twenty missions in the jungle, rucksack blown away from me, and not even a scratch, I knew that my luck would not last forever.

But I was no longer so sure about my capabilities either. One strong feeling pulled me each time into joining the LRRP missions along with my teammates. But another equally strong feeling told me... wait... don't go... you're gonna get killed for sure this time around...

Like Thompson, I had a strong premonition that my time had run out, and that my next patrol would be my last.

But I also knew deep inside, that it was all over for me as a LRRP team leader. I had reached the point where I was actually perfectly willing to shoot at our own troops... just to stay alive myself?!

A team leader must first concern himself about his men. Nothing else... So worried about my own survival, I could no longer devote my full concentration to lead an entire team to safety in the jungle. Instead, I would be putting all our lives at risk.

This was my last run...

* * *

Ironically, Gooney's next thoughtless actions actually saved my life. To help out the Second Brigade senior commanders, Gooney volunteered to put the LRRPs on perimeter guard duty at our base camp in Kontum at night. There were recent probes by the enemy searching for vulnerabilities in the wire and Gooney thought that the LRRP's experience in the jungle could determine what the enemy was planning. Thus, one evening, immediately after returning from a long miserable, wet mission in hostile territory, I was greeted with the unwelcome news that I would be pulling guard duty on the perimeter of our camp in an hour. I, on the other hand, had just spent twelve days and sleepless nights on radio relay, hiding, surreptitiously watching the enemy from the top of a lonely hill overlooking the border of Laos. I was looking forward to the expected comfort of my cot.

Instead, without time to wash myself or clean my weapon, I had to report directly to the officer of the guard, a newly arrived nineteen-year old second lieutenant, fresh out of OCS in Georgia, wearing starched fatigues and a pristine steel pot on his head. He inspected the guard and looked suspiciously at my long hair, grimy fatigues, unkempt appearance, and dirty CAR-15 with a scope, and barked:

"Soldier, you don't deserve this weapon!"

I didn't say anything about having to hide in the wet jungle for the past two weeks, and moved to my assigned bunker, several meters away from the perimeter wire, where I was to spend the night with a partner, peering out into the darkness - protecting the sleeping clerks, NCOs, and officers of the Second Brigade.

Bunkers were a great place to be when under a mortar attack, but useless for seeing or hearing an approaching foe, especially at night. Instead, I took a comfortable folding lawn

chair and moved it right up to the perimeter wire in front of my bunker. The wire was strung with empty C-ration cans, each containing a few pebbles: an old World War I trick used in the trenches. The slightest movement of the barbed wire would instantly rattle the pebbles and alert me that we were being probed. My right hand cradling my CAR, I held the “clacker” of my Claymore in my left, ready for any intruders coming my way through the wire. The lawn chair was obviously not authorized on guard duty, but after sleeping many nights on the bare hard ground during the last patrol, my stiff back was begging for some relief.

We had a wooden tower next to our bunker. It was about fifteen feet high, built out of a flimsy frame of 4 by 4s and protected by a single layer of sandbags on top. None of the LRRPs climbed up there at night because you could not see or hear anything from the top in the dark. Watchtowers made great targets, however, for VC sappers sneaking under the wire with their B-40 rockets aimed directly at them.



An hour after sunset, a flashlight blinked along the perimeter. It was that stupid lieutenant walking the wire in front of our bunkers, inspecting the guard again! What the hell was he doing out there?

I let him get close, and with a loud snap, locked and loaded my CAR-15, issuing a challenge, asking for the parole. The lieutenant was flustered and mumbled something, but I ordered him flat on the ground, arms and legs spread out wide. After shining a light in his face and confirming his identity, I let him stand with a warning that he could have been shot walking along that wire in front of my bunker. The lieutenant stormed off furious.

The next morning, I was called to Gooney's command post where he was energetically presenting his complaints about me. I didn't salute either officer, giving the lieutenant just a quick grin for a greeting, and a lazy wave with the barrel of my "dirty" CAR. Gooney gave me a terrific chewing out. I sighed to myself; looked like I would miss that promotion to sergeant again. To ensure that I completely understood who my superiors were, my punishment was to fill sandbags for the Second Brigade officers' quarters for the next two weeks!

I reported to Brigade First Sergeant Hawkins, who was a hulk of a man, known for intimidating and pushing around the junior enlisted men in the camp. He had not seen much combat himself, however, and was highly wary of the LRRPs, who ignored his posturing, and played pranks - like occasionally tossing a tear gas grenade into his tent at night to keep Sarge on his toes. I was filling sandbags around his tent and entertaining him with stories of VC booby traps we often found on our patrols, the kind that popped out of an old C-ration can to explode unexpectedly around the groin area. Sarge was not amused; he kept looking suspiciously at my soft wall of finished sandbags to see if there might be a "Bouncing Betty" grenade surprise hidden there for him.

We all laughed at Top because the LRRPs didn't sleep with any sandbags around them.



2nd Bde HHC "Top"

Several hours later, my LRRP platoon sergeant Blake discovered me shoveling sand, and exclaimed in disbelief:

"Poz... what the hell are you doing here?....."

Blake explained that I was supposed to be leading a team on patrol in two days' time; and before that, go on an over-flight of the area... He provided more details about Gooney's new mission - take four brand new trainees into a hostile AO on the border to look for an NVA staging area.

No way... It looked like Gooney appeared to have totally forgotten that he had just punished a "volunteer" LRRP team leader with twenty-one missions behind him, who had no obligation to risk his life alone in the jungle, especially on a patrol that made no sense.

With only a few careless words, Gooney had killed all the reasons why I was proud to be a LRRP.

What the hell was I doing here, I thought to myself, perplexed. Carrying a heavy rucksack through the wet jungle, constantly running from the enemy, and getting shot at. Meanwhile, our elegantly-groomed Airborne Ranger Special Forces captain, who could jump out of an airplane a hundred different ways, couldn't even understand my own job as team leader on the ground. Instead, he sat all by himself inside his safe bunker, all day long, moving little colored flags around on a large topo map that was tacked to the wall.

That little green pointed flag? That was me - - "Hotel-2-Foxtrot!"

Sergeant Blake would have to find a replacement. I had no problems filling sandbags; it would save me from a mission that would surely go wrong.

SSG Armin Blake soon left the LRRPs himself, to go back to the regular infantry because of a disagreement with Gooney. He would be killed in battle five months later on March 22, 1969, after having been posted to a new line company in the 2nd of the 8th Infantry Regiment that had ill-fatedly come under Gooney's command. Sergeant Blake was a good man. He just had the bad luck of crossing Gooney's path twice.



SSG Blake

* * *

To escape from Gooney's command, I visited the compound of our neighbors in Kontum - the CIA and 5th Special Forces' SOG (Special Operations Group aka Studies and Observation Group) that operated in the tri-border area of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Like the LRRPs, SOG ran long-range recce missions behind enemy lines. Unlike the LRRPs, who operated strictly inside Vietnam, the SOG teams ranged much deeper into neutral Laos and Cambodia. SOG also had its own dedicated air support assets, which had a much higher standard than did the Infantry. Maybe I could get a transfer to SOG.

The Special Forces were not interested in my volunteering for their missions unless I agreed to extend my tour in Vietnam immediately for another year; however, the senior CIA operations officer responded with great interest to my Russian name and language capabilities.

“We don’t need you running around in the jungles of Laos, friend,” he said to me, “I need you right here!”

He took me inside a bunker and pointed me toward an Akai reel-to-reel tape recorder.

“What are they saying?” he demanded impatiently.

I put on the headphones. Two Russians were talking on the radio. While I knew what they were saying, I couldn’t tell exactly what they were talking about. One was patiently explaining to the other how to repair and tune a complicated piece of electronics gear.

The CIA man jumped up. Soviet military advisors in neutral Laos helping the NVA set up their anti-aircraft defenses! He threaded another tape into the machine for me. This one was just a long recital in Russian of five letter groups, thirty minutes long.

Coded one-time pad (OTP) transmissions! Someone, somewhere in Laos, was sending secret messages on the radio. While we could not decipher them, we knew from the voice that he was a Soviet.

SOG borrowed me from Gooney on a temporary basis to help on a sensitive project tracking Soviet military advisors posted in Laos. Eventually, a special mission was organized by SOG to search for the persons behind the Russian transmissions, but I was not part of it, nor did I find out if anyone was actually captured.

The CIA’s “need to know” principle was being strictly enforced.

** * **

In the end, I rejoined the LRRPs in Kontum for my last two weeks in-country before separating from the military. The CIA officer at SOG passed me a post office box number in Washington in the event I was interested in an exciting job in civilian life. I was too exhilarated by the prospect of leaving both Vietnam and the Army, all at the same time, to think about a new job, and put the number away in my wallet.

I left Saigon on January 2, 1969, going back to "the world," not believing until the last minute that it was actually over. The continuous stress of the previous year convinced me that it couldn't end just like that - Charlie was still out there - nothing could ever change. I would be here forever.

It felt like being trapped in the Eagle's song "Hotel California"...

You can check out any time you like... But you can never leave!

When the "freedom bird's" wheels finally lifted off the tarmac, everyone on board our plane was waving and screaming wildly. Only now did it really sink in; I was actually leaving Vietnam in one piece - it was over.

But that uneasy feeling about the enemy still lurking somewhere nearby did not go away. It always crept in towards the end of the day when it started to turn dark.

I stretched back in my seat, closed my eyes, and focused on the faces of my friends - Yasui, Cope, Fretwell, Tex, Mayle, Courtney - when we said goodbye in our tent. They were happy, sad, envious, and even angry; and it made me want to stay, while they were all eager to come along with me. Would I see them again?

My mind also flashed back to the faces of my old teammates Steimbach, Thompson, Kull, Ahrendsen, Finley, Ghahate... These men, I knew, I would never see again.

** * **

In February 1969, all LRRP units in Vietnam were formally re-designated as the 75th Ranger Regiment and finally authorized to wear their provisional black berets. My Second Brigade LRRP teammates in Kontum continued to die in combat as new untrained

replacements filled the ranks, and the teams lost their edge under Gooney's command. During the first month after my departure, nine more LRRP / Rangers in the 4th Division would be killed in action, four of them during the same mission...



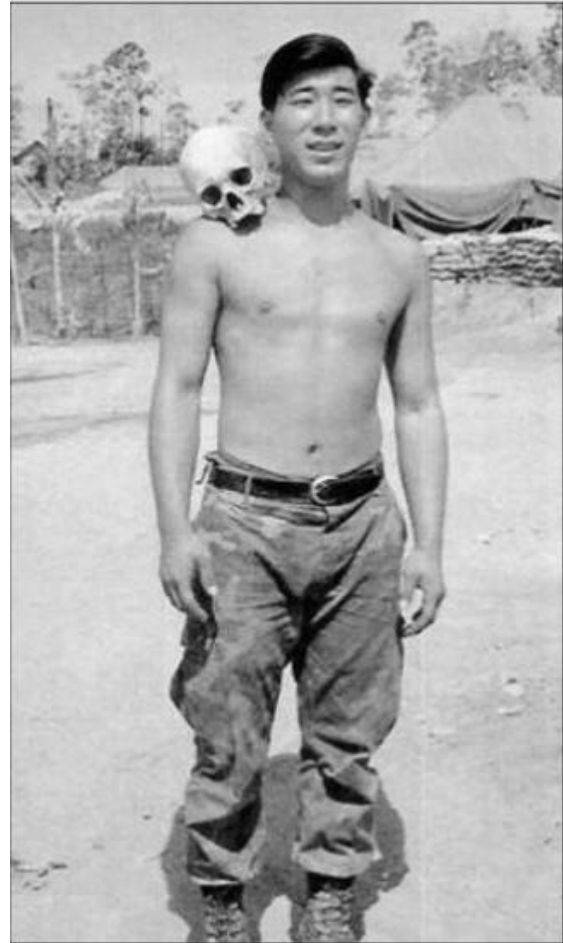
Empty hats of Second Brigade LRRPs Hancock, Dunn, McKinney, Richtmyer

The few original surviving Second Brigade LRRP team leaders told me by mail that they attributed the losses in our unit to Gooney's carelessness. He was sending out inexperienced teams, led by unseasoned team leaders, to collect more field intelligence - without much regard to training or support requirements for the teams. Gooney had become an enemy for the LRRPs, no different from the NVA or VC.

A secret vote was taken, and a plan was made to get rid of him.

Sgt. Ted Yasui from Hawaii, with forty-one missions under his belt, thirty as team leader, and who had never lost a man - quickly volunteered for the job. Just days before, he

had barely survived a mission himself where Gooney had refused to extract his team in heavy contact with the NVA - instructing Yasui to use his special "escape and evasion" skills and pull back to continue to monitor the enemy in the jungle for just a few more days!

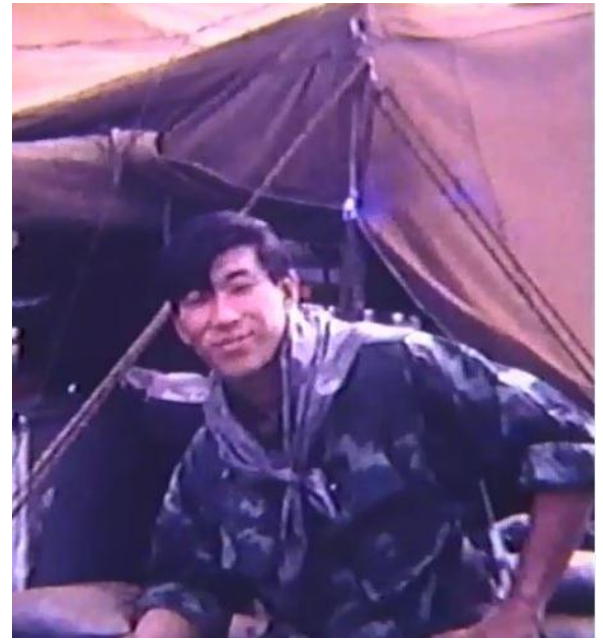


Yasui took action by sneaking into Gooney's tent at 0300 hours and firing off a full magazine from a CAR into the ground, right next to Gooney's head. A promise of what would be coming next...

Gooney was gone the same day.



Gooney's gone!



Sgt. Yasui - the next day - lounging in front of Gooney's empty tent

A couple of nervous CID investigators came around to interview the troops and look for evidence. They quickly found the "smoking gun" - Tom Shadegg's CAR-15, abandoned on the floor inside Gooney's tent. Problem was that LRRP Shadegg had left Kontum a few days before the incident, and was still on his R&R in Hawaii!

After his return from leave, the still suspicious CID investigators shadowed a bewildered Shadegg around our base camp for the next month. Just in case he was guilty.

Vietnam was where you sometimes had to shoot your own commanding officer in order to survive...

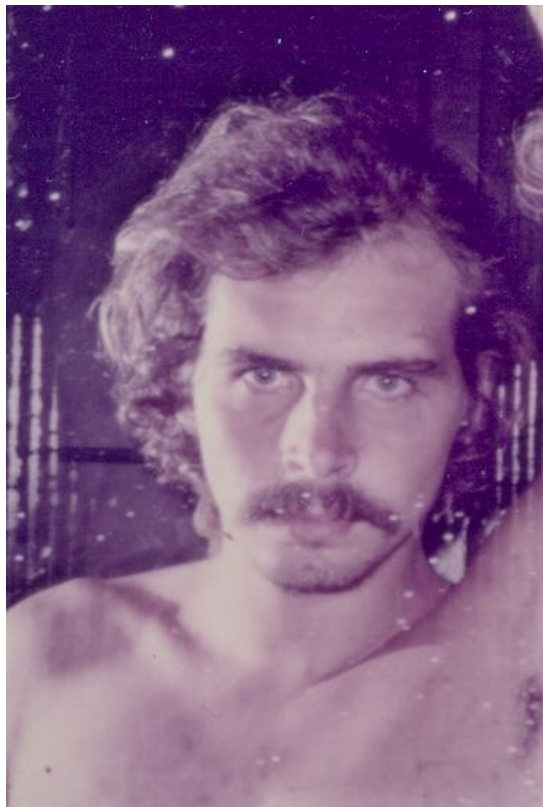
It don't mean nothin'.

* * *

Last week in the Army, January 1969

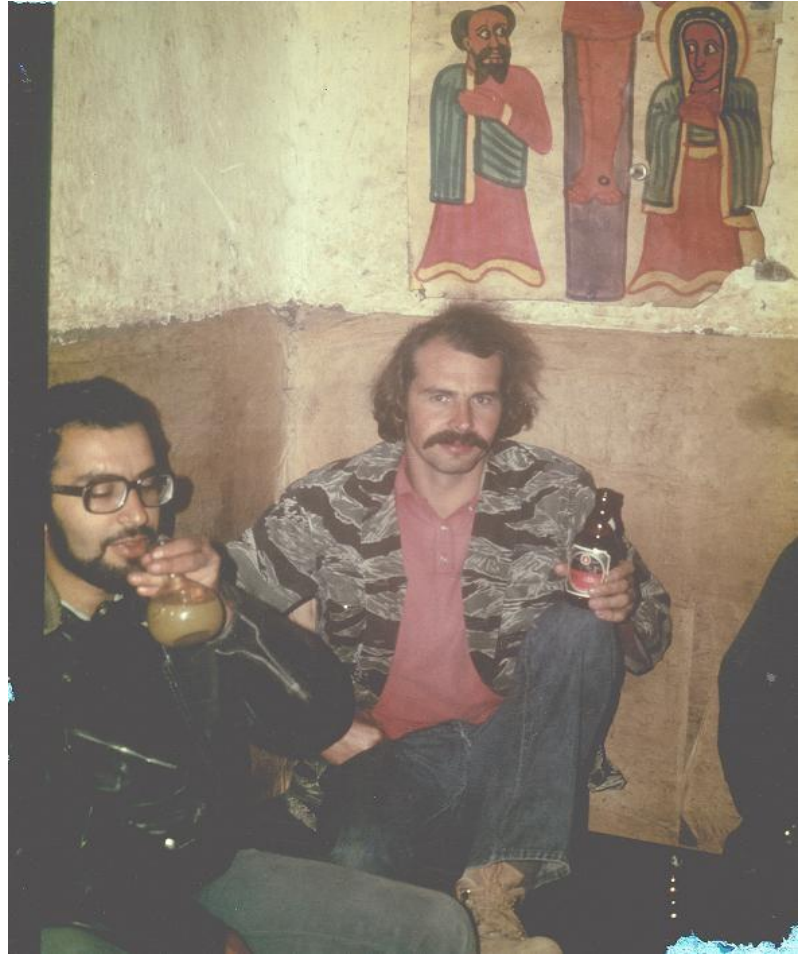


My grandmother – *Babushka Yelena* - happy that I came back all in one piece



A few months later... science student back in Hawaii at 23

CIA Operations Officer in Africa, 1975





Retired, Quintana Roo, Mexico, 2013



Feb. 2016 - my 70th Birthday - still wearing my half-century-old 'Nam fatigues - Pura Vida!